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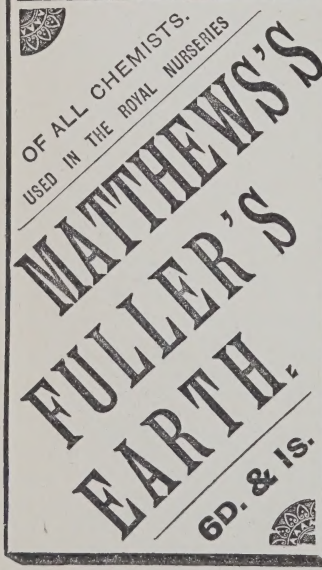

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PREFACE.

In submitting "Ritherdons Grange" to the public I may mention that a considerable portion is founded on fact.

The scenes within the Docks of the Port of London during the Great Strike, the barristers' chambers and the Dining Hall of the Temple, the incidents of the voyage to the East, a Ceylon coffee planter's life before and after the "great coffee blight," and the discovery of the Ceylon Treasure Chamber are all within my own experience or knowledge, or that of intimate personal friends.

THE AUTHOR.

October, 1890.

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RITHERDONS GRANGE.

CHAPTER I.

A STORM red setting summer's sun had flashed its lurid rays into the dreary homes and dingy chambers of two dense masses of unemployed men in busy London—toiling brains and toiling hands were both idle—extremes had met, and barristers of the Inns of Court and Thames-side labourers had idly paused on the wayside in the race for life.

The keen-witted lawyers were stayed, and the machinery of justice was still, clogged by the rust of the antiquated Long Vacation.

The machinery of river transport was silent, cogged by the brawny hands of its whilom workmen, now on strike at the great docks of the Port of London.

As the angry sun went down, the tearful wind rose and wailed over the idle energies and wasted intellects; and as the hours of the night sped on, dropped the mourning rain on scowling dockers' denuded homes and beat against the dormer windows and old brick walls of ancient Hare Court, Temple, where, in an old-fashioned chamber, two careworn barristers smoked in silence as they listened to the pattering drops. No other sound was heard save occasionally a shuffling rustle in the drear empty chamber above them, where one midnight Christmas Eve generations before a lonely old lawyer had been grappled by sudden death, and while he had vainly staggered to the door for help a merry party below had unwittingly listened to his faltering footsteps, and one fair lass had said: "The old gentleman appears to be having a dance to himself," and they had all laughed, not knowing it was a dance of death.

"He is at it again to-night," Jim Bolitho said as he nodded towards the ceiling; "unless things change we shall soon be ghosts too, dead of starvation in the wealthiest city ever known," he added bitterly. "Not a shilling in the world, our law books and clothes all gone, not knowing whether to turn to right or left when we go outside the door, and, now the Long Vacation has come, no chance of briefs; not that it matters much to me, I could not even go to our Common Room in these things," as he looked despairingly

at his old frock-coat and worn boots. His companion, Cecil Tarleton, looked sorrowfully at him and made no reply, as he glanced round the chambers, and his kindly, worn face looked pitifully at Jim as he continued:—

"The furniture is on the hire system, so that's no go," he muttered; "we can't pay the instalment next week, so that will be seized next; we *can't* starve, we must do something," and Bolitho pointed to the torn fragments of MSS. that littered the floor. "We went without dinner to buy that foolscap, and the infernal tale is back on our hands. By jingo, I'd work with my hands if I only knew—"

He was above the average in physique, and looked with anxious, yearning eyes on his chum as he abruptly ceased. Both had been intimate friends at Cambridge, and both had been called to the Bar some years before, and had entered on their profession full of high hopes and aspirations; both were of good old English families, but of no private means.

The heads of their houses had only enough to keep up appearances as country gentlemen, and their relations were all army and naval men with large families and small incomes besides their pay. Year after year of anxious, vain hoping for briefs had passed, the grim hand of poverty had seized and wrestled with them, until now it was a daily struggle for life. As he looked with anxious eyes at his pale and hollow-cheeked

chum, Tarleton eagerly leaned forward, and his face lit up with a transient gleam of hope.

"I have an inspiration, Jim—anything is better than this slow starvation. You know the great dock strike is in full swing?" Jim nodded assent. "In the papers this morning the dock directors are advertising for a thousand hands, and offering a pound a week and pay for overtime. You are as strong as a jackass"—his chum grunted a sardonic affirmative—"we'll go and work at the docks till we can save a few pounds." Jim jumped up.

"I will, by Jove," he shouted. "One of us must stay in town in case anything turns up. It must be you. You are fit to be seen, and you write better than I do. Perhaps some of the newspapers will take the 'copy' if I send you glowing accounts how I get on, and head them 'Besieged in London.'"

"All right, old man," Tarleton replied, as they warmly shook hands. "See now, one bright idea brings another. You can't work without eating first. 'We're nobbut wi'out ta brass,' as my old Yorkshire foster-mother used to say. Take those antique hammered brass hearth-dogs I brought from my Cambridge rooms to match the old oak panelling here. I forget what I gave, but it was something; they are all we have left of our own; wonder we never thought of them before; pawn them to-morrow, and you can go down in state, with a bag full of things."

"Oh, Shakespeare! to what base uses may we come at last," pathetically said Jim, as he rubbed his nose and looked at Cecil; "but needs must when the devil drives. Hullo! there is the first tinge of a rosy dawn, and it's now a beautiful night, a good omen for the future. For a time exit Bolitho barrister; entry as a horny-handed son of toil. I must soothe my lacerated feelings by recollecting that Ruskin and Tom Hughes both advocate a course of navvydom at one time or another for all university men."

"Better you went to the docks than both of us to the dogs," Cecil said, laughing. "Take those dogs in the morning to keep the other dogs off. There is no more tobacco; let's turn in."

"You stay in bed till I come back from the pawnbroker's," Jim said next morning, as he poked his head into Cecil's room. "I'm blacking my boots; it's my farewell sacrifice on the altar of respectability, and I believe a beastly ostentation unworthy of me under the circumstances."

Cecil nodded affectionately, and Jim went down the creaking old stairs of the Inn with the brass dogs, which he had placed in their solitary battered hat-box, under his arm.

"Got half a sov.," he said cheerfully on his return. "You will be better after some tea and a steak, and I have got a bag full of things to take with me, and five bob over for you;" and he bustled about, after the manner of lawyers in

residential chambers, and they soon sat down to the best meal they had had for a long time.

"I'm taking a lesson in the rigours of a siege," Jim said, "when I get to eating dogs. It will be a unique experience being besieged in London. I'll work all the overtime I can, and soon send some money." The glow of renewed strength lit up Cecil's cheeks, and as his mouth was full he only nodded with a grin.

"The morning is still young," Jim went on "I have looked at the 'A B C'; it's only about threepence to the West India Wood Docks. I shall go there because the strike began there Trust to me to get through the enemy's lines all right. If the pickets ask any questions, I am a steward going on board the pleasure yacht *Ceylon*; I know she's there. I shall let myself down easy. Barrister, steward, docker. Take care of yourself; Good-bye!"

With a sigh and prayer for his safety, Cecil watched him pass through the ancient portals of the Hall.

When a dear friend is absent, and doubly so when known to be on a mission of peril, the hours pass on leaden wings, and so Cecil found until the letter punctually arrived, three days later.

"I passed the crowds of dockers and pickets unquestioned," Jim's letter ran, "and am having a high old time. 'What do you want, sir?' a grey-haired inspector of police asked me, after I had been admitted into the besieged dock. 'You

can get *in*, because you *may* be going to a ship on business; but you must have a ticket and be searched before you can get out.' 'I have come in response to the advertisement for hands,' I answered. 'You really mean it?' the adjacent dock official said dubiously. 'Yes,' I answered, 'and I pledge myself to stay until the strike is over.' I was met with every courtesy, and at once enrolled on the books of the Dock Company."

Enclosed was a postal order, and Cecil settled down to knock Jim's experiences into shape for the London evening newspapers.

CHAPTER II.

THE work at the West India Wood Docks was not hard, owing to the complex machinery employed, which enabled the heavy logs of satinwood, teak, and mahogany, weighing many tons, to be as deftly handled as if they weighed as many pounds, and Jim Bolitho won golden opinions by always being the first to commence and the last to leave off work.

The whole circumstances and surroundings were wholly novel, and not unpleasant to Jim; and his power of happy adaptability to circumstances and his sunny nature soon established him as a favourite, both with the dock officials and the besieged labourers, and, after he had been there a few days, he was by unanimous consent appointed foreman of a gang of workmen, with increased pay and responsibilities.

The first night there had been an anxious discussion with regard to the momentous question of beer, and after a whip round for money it was decided that Jim should make friends with the guardian police at the gate, explain their needs, and ask advice.

"Lor, sir," said the policeman, as he pocketed

the eleemosynary bob Jim had collected, "if you puts yer collar and tie on, *you* are safe enough; they will think you came from one of the ships. Don't you buy any vittles nor spirits—they have got 'em on board—only beer."

Jim thanked his worthy instructor and his own forethought in bringing the bass bag. "It's like camping up the river in old boating days," he thought, and walked boldly into the tavern outside the gates, where a number of cursing strikers were outvying each other in describing the bodily tortures they intended to inflict on the "blacklegs" when they got in and "copped 'em." Jim was glad when his modest glass of ale was drunk and two half-gallon jars of beer handed him. His return was received with acclamation, and he was appointed beer-man for the rest of the siege.

The day he had been made foreman he had worked harder than usual.

The fresh, keen air of the docks had already done him good, and with a pleasant tiredness he dreamily lay back on his bed listening to the scraps of talk around him. His two next neighbours were a Calvinist Yorkshire tyke and a red-hot Irish Catholic labourer. "Well, look here, Yorkie, ain't there an Epistle to the Romans in yer Bible?"

"Ay?"

"Well, then, where's yer epistle to yer Protestants? Yah!" and Paddy turned over with a triumphant whoop and went to sleep.

"New Zealand ain't the Antipodes; they are a little group of rocky islands 200 miles off. I was in a coaster, and we were driven by a storm out of our course, and we puts in there for water, and finds an old wreck with a lot of money in gold and silver in the cabin, and our skipper divides it fair, and I runs *home** with my share, to find my parents dead in our little village. Going back to New Zealand when I've earned the passage money. Lots of room. Lots of money and lots to do there."

Jim looked at the speaker, a decent lad, talking animatedly to his group of listeners. Not far off, two sedate farmer-looking men were in conversation. "Puts cows off their milk. Why, when I had a mash [marsh] opposite Greenwich, them dratted corpses from the *Princess Alice* would come a-drifting on my shore, a-frightening my beastes till I was wild."

"I got broke over 'orse-racin'," said another, a little horsey chap, with nose tip-tilted like the petal of a flower, and who was sitting cross-legged on his bed puffing at a long churchwarden. "I used ter keep a trainin' establishment at Chantilly." This gentleman sportsman always had a crowd of awe-stricken younger men as listeners, and he started later what he called a "bank" at cards, to his exceeding emolument and content.

* All colonists call the old country "home; long may they do so!

Farther on a group were listening with compressed lips and angry brows to the excited recital of a man who had been sent on duty to a distant dock.

"Poor fellow, it was his own fault; he'd always been fond of his drink, and now it's doubly his ruin. He had come down in the world, like lots here," he continued as he looked round, "and he was employed splitting open frozen sheep at the Australian Dock, and had saved a handful of silver and must go out to have a booze; but he doesn't act artful like the reporter there," nodding at Jim ("the reporter" being Jim Bolitho's nickname), "but he just suicided himself. 'Where yer from, and wot are yer?' sez the strikers' pickets at once. 'I'm a butcher,' he sez. Now, that was wrong; they don't use the word; he should have said 'carcass splitter.' So they passes the word and watches him. He goes into the Galleons Hotel opposite, and the silly Sammy goes to the nobs' bar (he had bin a gent once) and calls for brandy and soda, and chaffs the barmaid as if he were a toff agin, cos he had a few bob. They had their spy; that was enough. When they threw him in at the dock gate his nose and ribs was broken, and, pore chap, he's pretty well done for."

"I should like a fight with them," one listener said between his teeth; "And I, and I," said others as they clenched their teeth.

"Well, comrade," said a tall soldier, with a

splendid reach of arm and a boxer's bullet head, erect and soldierly as he sat on his bed, talking to a little ex-gunner who sat next him nursing his knees, which he had drawn up to his chin while he puffed at his pipe, "we had bin fighting the Burmese all day, and it was dark when we charged with a cheer into the big pagoda. They had made embrasures in the walls for their cannon—pretty pieces we found next day, all carved dragon's mouths for muzzles; but, bless yer! not much to fight with. Well, we dashed inside, Major Eyre leading, but the dacoits was all bolted, save the dead. It was pitch dark, so the chaps lights candles and sticks 'em on the captured guns by dropping melted grease and sticking 'em on, and we all begins smoking. We was up to our knees in sand, and Major Eyre he stoops down and picks up a handful. 'Out of the place for your lives, men,' he shouts; 'lift them candles careful.' The enemy had laid the place three feet deep in loose gunpowder. There was no scurry; each man nearest puts his hand round a candle, blows it out careful, and we camps outside; and next day we sees if one spark had fallen we'd have been blown to bits."

Jim had already chummed with this man and another decent fellow, a former planter in Ceylon, and two or three other men, and he listened to the hum of talk till he fell asleep.

As time went on, the invigorating air, the bracing swim in the dock at early dawn and eve,

the healthy work and plentiful food, had made Jim as strong as ever he had been when he had rowed his college boat to victory; and he felt he could return to fight the battle of life with renewed hope and spirits.

The same conditions, combined with the possession of considerable savings, also influenced a large number of the men besieged in the dock, and the demon of unrest entered into their souls; the more so as, although beer was retailed in the docks by the company to the men, it was but in strictly limited quantities, its bringing in through the besieging lines of strikers being a matter of hazard and difficulty, the convoys having been on more than one occasion attacked and the barrels destroyed. Like Jeshurun, "they waxed fat and kicked," especially some of the old soldiers and younger men, who pined to see the streets again after being cooped up so long, and a sortie was suggested. This idea, when mooted, was peremptorily put a stop to by Jim Bolitho, Earle (the planter), the tall soldier, and several others of the older and cooler heads. "You darn fools," said the strategist of the party, "if yer did get out, do yer think you would get yer beer by fighting for it, or that the dock people would let yer back, go out by ones and twos? Tidy yerselves and get passes and come back quietly at eight when the gates close." This advice was so evidently sensible that all acquiesced, and the necessary passes obtained from the dock officials,

who knew none of them had been seen since the strike commenced some time before, and trusted to their being mistaken by the pickets for the crews, firemen, &c., of the crowded shipping. "Be careful, men, you have worked well; remember we cannot help you once you are in the enemy's ground."

"Ay! ay! sir!" was the cheery response.

"What do you say, reporter, to our having a quiet stroll?" Earle, the Ceylon ex-coffee-planter, said to Jim. They had formed a warm friendship, but, beyond having mentioned that he had been a coffee-planter, Jim knew nothing of his mate's past; and beyond knowing that Bolitho wrote for the press, Earle was ignorant of Jim's position, as, with the innate good breeding of gentlemen, both had forborn prying for unvolunteered confidences.

"Yes, I am game," Jim answered, thoughtfully, "the more so as I expect we shall be needed. I expect there will be a fight as we get back, and we know what incarnate, savage, cowardly devils those dockers are. I expect we shall have to stick together, and make a rush at the finish. Here, Basset," he said, turning to the tall soldier, "keep your chaps well in hand when they get back. Who is going?"

"Leigh, the gunner, and the 43rd and 50th men, and big MacAllister, the Black Watch, and all the Naval Reserve lot, sir," Basset promptly answered, for he knew Jim was a gentleman.

"Oh, well," Earle said, laughing, "we must just let things slide."

"I expect mischief," Jim said. "Do you remember that tiger-faced, beetle-browed brute who called himself Reid, who would not work and who I turned out of my gang when they promoted me to be foreman? He disappeared as mysteriously as he came, and I heard he loafed about the dock for the rest of the day. He was spy."

"I know the beast," Basset said, indignantly. "Spy, eh? I'd like to catch him alone."

"We may do more good later if anything does take place," Earle whispered to Bolitho. "If we are not seen going out of the gates, we will slip away and take the train from South Dock (a railway station in the dock) to Greenwich, have a stroll round the Hospital, and get back to await developments."

"Good idea," Jim said; and, after the extravagance of a "good old time" and dinner at Greenwich, they reached the West India Dock Station as their comrades began to straggle back to the dock gates.

CHAPTER III.

THE peaceful summer's evening was gently closing in; the warm, soft gloaming shed a gentle haze amongst the towering masts and rigging of the idle vessels in the dock; fleecy clouds swept with silver oars to the purple shores of the golden sunset; all nature was calm and still. But on earth a human storm was brewing—a small black cloud, ever slowly growing, with ragged, ever-widening edges, was hovering round the West India Dock gates, while from it came ominous growlings like the first mutterings of a distant thunderstorm. As it grew in blackness and density, inky tentacles shot forth from the main body into the slums and bye streets of Limehouse, like the feelers of some octopus searching for its prey.

Bolitho and Earle looked at the small but dense cloud of sullen-browed men standing on both sides of the road leading to the dock gates.

"I hope our fellows are safe back," Earle said. "We must put on a bold front and walk through these pickets."

Jim was brave, but he felt his nerves strained

to their utmost tension as they walked carelessly towards the dock gates.

A few of their men had entered (as they learned afterwards), and their evasive replies and ignorance of names of vessels in the docks had aroused the suspicions of the watchful pickets, who had hurriedly commenced sending men in all directions for reinforcements, while the guardian police inside the dock had noted the signs of the coming storm and had silently sent for more men. Jim paused irresolutely. "Wait for a bit here in the shadow of the archway—it wants ten minutes to closing time; if any of our men are still out they will make a rush to get in in time. I can see the strikers' suspicions have been aroused. I expect we shall dance to a pretty tune directly. Look," he said, as he pulled Earle into the shadow of the railway arch that spanned the road, "there is that savage, the spy Reid; see him going from group to group."

Earle's hand tightened on his arm in response, but he made no reply.

As they looked, some half-dozen of their comrades in the dock came round the high road towards the gates. A wild howl burst from the pickets, and a yell of exultation from Reid, as the whole body of strikers hurled themselves on the non-union men. In a moment the storm had burst, and the road from the railway arch to the dock gates was filled with a yelling, cursing, struggling crowd, a dense dank steam quivered

up in the calm summer air from their strained muscles and labouring bodies, the incense of the god of battles. A shrill scream of pain rang through the muttered curses and hoarse shouts, and Bolitho and Earle, springing forward, saw young Antipodes Ellis (for nearly all the besieged workmen had a kindly nickname) struggling in the grasp of a burly ruffian, who held his arms pinioned to his sides from behind, while half-a-dozen strikers tried to break his legs with vicious kicks, a favourite method of the strikers to disable non-union men. Jim and Earle dashed into their midst, and a heavy blow under the ear from Earle's fist dropped the docker senseless. Neither Earle nor Jim could ever exactly remember what followed. They were separated at once, and for some moments it was an up and down fight, a ding-dong, hammer and tongs, give and take; wherever Jim saw a face, smack his fist went into it; while in the fierce joy of the fight he felt nothing in return.

Fortunately, the hour being late, only the strikers' pickets and a smaller crowd than usual were present, the majority of the dockers being absent, busily engaged in getting drunk on the proceeds of the tickets given them by the Strike Committee. But still they outnumbered the non-union men ten to one, and though the besieged had struggled bravely towards the gates, and though several dockers lay on the ground, all were more or less wounded. Jim had lost sight

of Earle, and with a couple of his mates who had closed up and were standing back to back to him, was desperately keeping at bay about a score of dockers who, for a moment, had recoiled from round them—a savage rush—crick-crack, two dockers went down beneath Jim's right and left handers. "It's as good fun as a town and gown row at Cambridge, but we are in an awful mess," he thought, as he saw reinforcements pouring in from the neighbouring slums. Again a fierce close, and he could feel his comrades at his back reel and stagger as the blows poured in. "Push for the gates," and another few feet were gained. He could see surging knots of men near him, and knew that his comrades were also hotly engaged in the unequal fight.

"Yah, I've copped yer, yer blarsted masher," the tiger-faced spy, Reid, roared as he caught sight of Bolitho, and struggled furiously to get at him. The light of battle blazed in Jim's eyes, and he leapt forward to meet him, but the surging crowd separated them. Some of the men in the first group had reached the gates in safety, but were too exhausted to return and help their comrades, and the crowd that had pursued them to the gates effectually blocked the way against Jim and those who had come up later, and in a few moments more they must have gone down, to be killed or maimed for life by the dockers' savage kicks, for no mercy was shown on either side to those who were down, whether friend or foe.

Beyond hoarse shouts on the edge of the crowd as contingents of dockers hurried up and plunged into the fray, no sound was heard where the actual fighting was going on; both sides were too terribly in earnest to waste their breath, and nothing was heard save the smack, thud, crash, as blows fell on face and body in sullen silence, save occasionally a muttered oath, until in the near distance Jim heard the chorus of a rollicking sea song; he recognised the voices, and his heart leaped up with renewed hope, "It's those Naval Reserve chaps of ours," he roared, "fight on." As the sturdy old seadogs, who cared nothing for all the dockers in creation, came staggering arm in arm round the corner, they promptly realized the state of affairs, and they sobered and straightened instantly with instinctive discipline.

"At them, shipmates," shouted an ex-boatswain of H.M. ship *Condor*, and they knocked the yelling dockers right and left. The clock chimes for closing were just beginning to strike, and with a rush the tall soldier Basset, the giant Highlander, MacAllister, of the Black Watch, and the other soldiers who had come up charged the demoralized strikers from behind. The non-union men all knew each other by sight, and in this had a great advantage over numbers of the dockers, who did not know friend from foe, and often struck their own men. Again the crowd surged towards the gates. "Reporter, reporter, help me," Jim heard Earle's well-known voice

cry, and, dashing forward, he found his friend on the ground, and being viciously kicked by his foes, led by the spy Reid. Jim knocked down the foremost docker on top of him, and stood over them, and some of his freshly-arrived comrades hurried up.

"I'll kill you next, masher," roared the spy, as he aimed a heavy blow at Jim, who guarded it with his left arm, which immediately fell helpless to his side, while his adversary roared with delight at the result, and prepared to repeat the blow.

"Pick up yer pal with yer other arm; I'll manage that big bully," he heard a voice hastily say, and there was the little sportsman, the intimate friend of the Duchess of Manton, and who had kept the racing establishment at Chantilly. Even in the midst of their danger Jim involuntarily smiled as he thought of David and Goliath, and wondered how the plucky little chap beside him intended to attack the burly giant opposite.

"I ain't bin among French roughs for nothing; drag our mate away;" as he spoke he leapt lightly over Earle's senseless form, and, swiftly turning on his heel as he did so, he administered the French *savate*, or backward kick, with his foot, full under the giant's ear. The spy gave a stifled howl and fell, wildly clutching at his broken jaw. This was the turning point in the fight. The dock police reinforcements had come up and charged, batons in hand, from the gates; and after driving the cursing crowd of dockers back to the railway arch, formed in line across the road until

the besieged had picked up those of their comrades who lay insensible and had carried them inside the dock gates. And when all were safe within the dock, as it had been a fair fight, the police retired and allowed the discomfited dockers possession of the now deserted battle-ground, whence they carried their wounded to be solaced by libations in the swarming neighbouring taverns.

"Well, men, you are a precious lot of idiots," growled the chief inspector of the dock police; "you had better take your mates and pump on them," he said, as with practised hands he felt the insensible men. "Umph! no bones broken," he added. "Hullo! yes. This one has his collar-bone broken," he said, as he came to Earle, who had struggled into a sitting posture, and was looking utterly demoralised, and as if he did not care if anyone had left him a fortune of a million pounds or not—much the same as one feels when seasick. "As for you, Reporter, as the chaps call you, you orter go and chase your own feet or put your head in a bag. Come here with me."

Jim submissively followed him.

"I ought not to do it, I know," the kindly grey-haired inspector grumbled; "but there! there's a couple of bottles of prime dock brandy; and let me see," he said, as he routed amongst his private stores, "oh! here's a bottle of rum; be careful how you serve that out, it's over-proof, d'ye hear?" Jim grasped the situation and

saluted. "And here's a jar of vinegar for all your bruises—be off!" and with rough good humour he shoved him out of the police quarters. "It was a pretty fight," he added, *sotto voce*, "made my old blood warm again; mum's the word!" and he grasped Jim's unwounded hand with a friendly grip.

"Here, Basset," Jim said a few moments later to the 43rd man, whom he found at the pump ruefully mopping a gash over an eye, "carry these to Sugar Wharf sleeping-room, and ask no questions."

Basset winked responsively with the unwounded eye, and Jim turned to the lately insensible men, who, having been duly pumped on, were struggling in various picturesque attitudes to their feet.

Fortunately, owing to the healthy, abstemious life, all were as hard as nails; and after a judicious distribution of the brandy, rum, and vinegar, Earle's broken collar-bone proved to have been the most serious injury inflicted; and after the men who had *not* come out of the dock had been solemnly informed that the *next* man who said, "I told you what would happen," would be ducked in the dock next day, all went to sleep.

Towards waking time Bolitho had a dream. He dreamed he had been appointed to defend a docker in Court, and that the docker had refused to plead, and that the judge had decided that he, Jim the barrister, must undergo the ancient

penalty inflicted on prisoners who refused to plead, and was to undergo the old sentence that "he should be stretched out on the prison floor, and as many weights as he could bear, and more should be placed on him, and that for the first day he should have a morsel of barley bread, and water from the nearest running water next the prison, and next day the bread only, and then nothing more till he died or pleaded." And that he gasped and—he awoke to find himself with a disabled left arm, and stiff and sore all over.

As he painfully sat up, the first object that met his gaze was Antipodes Ellis, who was not unlike a tattooed Maori, as his face was adorned with variegated stripes of black sticking plaster.

"Hallo, reporter! you do look a picture. Best thanks for saving me yesterday. Have a drop of brandy? I saved it for you."

Jim gratefully drained the cup, and looked around in silence as he awaited developments. First one form sat up, then another, and everyone solemnly gazed at his neighbour.

From a distant corner of Sugar Dock sleeping room Basset's tenor voice warbled forth, the dulcet strain was taken up, and when the outraged dock officials peered in, on their tour of inspection before the men went to breakfast, a volume of sweet sound swelled forth—

Oh! what a surprise,
All lovely black eyes.

CHAPTER IV.

THE scandalised dock officials fled to make their report, and amid as many grunts and groans as a warehouse full of Chicago pigs, the warehouse full of ex-warriors dressed.

"Good-bye to the Docks to-day, I am off to town instanter; the picnic is over as far as I am concerned," Jim Bolitho ruefully thought as he rubbed his stiff arm. "However, I have saved more than a fiver. I told Cecil to lay out the money he got for the newspaper articles as he thought best; last night's fight will make 'copy' good enough for a few pounds more. Oh, well! should be a marked man in any case. No more getting a drop of beer, and the strike must soon be over now. I'll go back."

"The 'planter' wants you, reporter; he's very bad," Basset hurriedly said as he passed him on the way to muster.

"All right," Bolitho said, and he hastened to the corner where he lay.

"I have heard from the chaps how you saved my life," Earle feebly said, as he held out his hand. "I am more hurt than I thought; besides the collar-bone, those kicks have hurt me inside."

"Oh! don't say that, old man," Jim said, and he leaned down and whispered in his ear. "I am not going to let you go to any hospital. I have a set of chambers in town, I am a barrister, and my friend Cecil Tarleton and I will nurse you till you get well. We have enough in hand to keep us all for the next two months." Earle smiled gratefully.

"You have relieved my mind so much. I had nothing when I came here, but I have about five pounds in the world," he said, "I will join it to yours. I dreaded going to a hospital amongst strangers; take care of this for me," he continued, as he fumbled in his breast and took out a small leather bag.

"Open it."

There were about six pounds in gold and silver, and a strip of parchment carefully rolled up in a piece of silk.

"Lean down."

Jim obeyed, and Earle unrolled the parchment with nervous fingers.

"Years ago I left Ceylon—it is too long to tell you now. Look at this plan; here is Kandy, the up-country capital; here where I place my finger is the map of the district, where there is a buried treasure. Only I know where it is. There are the roads and landmarks. If I die, go and get it; if I live somehow we will get there and share it together," and as he spoke his eyes brightened and he tried to sit up.

"Die! that be smothered for a tale"; and Jim gave him some brandy and it visibly revived him.

"I must go and resign our situations now," he said, "and take my wigging from the officials. I have not heard from my friend for several days; I will now write to him explaining matters and say we shall be home to-morrow, and don't talk any more rubbish about dying."

"I caught it hot for both of us, but they are very kind," he said on his return. "I have written to Tarleton that we shall reach Hare Court to-morrow at dusk. Come along, now, and be rubbed," and as the vinegar went in the pains went out, and by the next morning two rainbow-hued athletes were on the high road to convalescence, for Earle soon learned he was not nearly so bad as he had thought.

"How my shoulder pricks," Earle said as he looked at his arm in its sling.

"Glad to hear it," Bolitho answered, "that's the bone reuniting with 'the first intention,' as the doctors say. The superintendent told me this morning that the dock was not a cockpit, which I presume he meant sarcastic for us to slide."

And after a kindly farewell all round, Earle and Bolitho took the train from the South Dock Station, and found themselves again in the crowd of London.

"I have not heard for some days from my chum," Jim had told Earle in the train, "but he

has heard from me, and though it will be but humble, you shall have a warm welcome. We must get a couple of suits of mine out of pawn, you are just my size. It will make a hole in our savings, but it can't be helped, we shall still have enough to keep us till something else turns up."

Earle pressed Bolitho's hand, for they had conceived a warm liking for each other. "Good old chap" was all he said, but Jim understood, and it was enough.

The distance from Fenchurch Street Station to the Temple was not far, and they entered Hare Court as the sentinel stars set their watch in the sky. The Court was buried in gloom, save the two windows of Cecil's and Jim's chambers, which shone forth a ruddy, hospitable light.

"Cecil is having an illumination in our honour," Jim said, laughing; "welcome to Hare Court; mind the stairs," and they pushed wide the open "oak" and entered.

A hilarious shout welcomed them. "Glad you are back; welcome, Mr. Earle. Jim has told me about you; your mother and mine were old friends many years ago. What are you staring at, Jim, you great oaf?" he said, but his eyes twinkled mischievously as he spoke.

Jim stood transfixed. "Wha—, what's up?" he gasped. Instead of the bare walls and scanty furniture, and the old table cloth and the three plates (one of them cracked) he expected to see, and some chops flanked by a jug of porter, the

table was covered with plate and glass. A lordly cold roast turkey flanked a cold ham, while a huge lobster salad crowned the whole. An ice-pail contained several bottles of Jim's favourite brand of champagne, and a magnum of claret sent forth ruby beams above its wicker-work case. All their pictures were reinstated on the walls, and all the cherished relics of their college days and happy past had been redeemed from their uncle's clutches; even the brass hearth-dogs which Jim had pawned seemed to wink affectionately at him.

Cecil stood by enjoying Jim's amazement. "You old ragged, grease-covered, disreputable-looking disgrace to the Inn," he said, "thanks to you I have had an adventure too—a profitable one, as you see. Go to your room; I have got all your things out of pawn. Stay, have a drink first," and he opened a bottle of champagne.

"Glad to see you, Earle; here's success in the future;" and they drained their tumblers.

"Will you shut that mouth?" he continued, as Jim slowly set down his tumbler and stood staring at him; "give Earle one of your suits, and dress and come to my room."

Jim did as he was directed, and found Cecil unlocking their old hat-box.

"I haven't much money, but look here," he said, as Jim entered, and he handed him a dazzling scintillating mass of diamonds, earrings, bracelets, locket, and a magnificent diamond

necklace, the whole mass of jewels worth at least £5,000.

"Where did you get them?" gasped Jim; "honest Injun, got 'em honest?"

"Upon my honour, Jim, I don't know," Cecil answered seriously.

Jim's amazement increased.

"I shall want your assistance and advice take the goods the gods provide now;" and he carefully put the hat-box and its glittering contents away. "Come to supper."

Jim nodded, and they entered the sitting-room, where Earle was waiting.

"Well, you couple of black-eyed Susans," Cecil said, after they had revelled in the supper, "I doubt if a more disgraceful-looking barrister ever entered the Inn than Jim. We will have a mutual confidence society early to-morrow, after we have had a swim in the old Roman bath in the Strand; *nunc est bibendum*—take a cigar," and he handed them a box of the primest Havannahs.

Jim had long since lost even the faculty of wondering, and they applied themselves so assiduously to the champagne that all Jim's recollection ceased after he had performed the hospitable rites of carrying Earle and Cecil into the wrong beds, and then falling asleep himself, "all standing," on the sofa.

Cecil Tarleton was the first to awake as the midsummer's sun shone on him, and, as he looked

perplexedly round the room, a smile crept on his face.

"Great Cæsar's ghost! what a head I have. We must have been far gone for Jim to put us in the wrong rooms. Here, wake up," he said, as he stood by Jim, still fast asleep on the sofa, and gazed at that worthy's rainbow-hued countenance. "Get up, you black-eyed blackleg." This well-remembered opprobrious epithet, having been the dockers' war-cry in the fight, and the epithet given to the non-union men by the strikers, promptly appealed to Jim's slumbering faculties, and he rose to the situation.

"Oh, my head!" he said, as he carefully felt it to ascertain whether his first impression that it had swelled to the size of a balloon was correct.

"Just so," Cecil sympathetically answered. "Have a champagne cocktail, horny-handed son of toil?" Jim's head promptly nodded like a china mandarin's. "While I mix three, go to my room and see how Earle is getting on. You got us into the wrong rooms somehow."

"Great Scott!" gasped Jim, and he hurried off; and by the time Cecil had dressed and mixed the foaming pick-me-ups, two figures, "clothed and in their right minds," as Jim remarked, entered the room.

Cecil gave Earle a warm welcome. "Yesterday was a day to be marked with a white stone; we don't often have such a legitimate excuse for a spree. Jim and I are going to the old Roman

bath, in the Strand, for a swim. Mrs. Jukes, the laundress, will soon be here. Tell her to devil the rest of the turkey for breakfast, old man."

"I know a grand Ceylon receipt for a devil," Earle answered, laughing. "If I may tell Mrs. Jukes to get me a few ingredients, I think you will like it."

"By all means; this is Liberty Hall, in a free country. We will soon have your collar-bone well, I hope, and then we'll face the world '*tria juncta in uno*'—never mind the gender. Come along, Jim."

And with a couple of kindly nods they left Earle to ingratiate himself with Mrs. Jukes, who appeared all smiles and curtseys shortly afterwards, and with whose willing aid he had the perfection of a coffee planter's curry prepared by the time his hosts returned.

After the sleepy blue uniformed night porter, with the lamb and the flag of the Middle Temple on the badge on his arm, had swung open the wicket in the massive iron studded old portals of the Inn to admit Cecil and Jim into the silent street, bright in the early morning, Cecil linked his arm in Jim's and began—

"Your letters and what you told me last night have made me *au fait* in all your doings. I had intended writing to you to come back. I had just arrived in town when I got your letter, and so made preparations accordingly. I have been in Yorkshire."

CHAPTER V.

"OH! that s the racket?" interpolated Jim.

"Well, here goes. I felt very lonely after you left, and was very glad when I received your first letter and could start a series of articles I called 'Besieged in London.' How many 'letters from our special correspondents at the front' have been written in those rooms," he added laughing, as he looked up at the newspaper offices as they went down the Strand. "However, I had made about ten pounds for us out of them during the time you were at the docks. You wrote such glowing accounts of the good the change of scene and air was doing you, and were always pressing me to take a few days trip somewhere out of the money in hand, and I longed to get away from this stifling London, so I looked through the papers for a cheap excursion north, as I wanted to be among the old tykes again.

"I soon found what I wanted, and I cleared out the old box of its mass of papers and bills to put a few things in. As I did so a packet fell down, and idly opening it I found a lot of old college papers. As I glanced through them

rather sadly, thinking of the dear old University days that were gone, I came across Dick Gainsborough's I O U for £200. Do you remember that night? We had been playing heavily in the early part of the evening, Dick had pocketed about a hundred of my money, in notes, which he had won, but at the last, as the stakes increased, we were all playing on I O U's, and I took Dick's to save trouble, as we generally squared accounts next day."

"Oh, yes, I remember that bit of waste paper," Jim answered carelessly; "Gainsborough disappeared mysteriously just afterwards. I suppose you tore it up?"

"No," Tarleton answered, seriously, "I kept it, and on it turns my story. Gainsborough's old father led a solitary life at a lonely grange in Yorkshire, not far from where my people once lived; I knew there was hereditary madness in the family, and I guessed what had happened. Just after that wine-party at Caius the curse of his race came upon Dick, and he was taken away by a watchful keeper, an old servant of the family, that man whom we used to think was his body-servant, and hurried north. A letter I received from home confirmed my suspicions, and I made up my mind to lose my hundred in notes he had, and threw the I O U in my cash-box, and forgot all about it as time rolled on. He was of a gloomy, taciturn, jealous disposition, and, as the truth leaked out, with a few pitying words

he was dismissed from the undergraduates' memories."

"I remember now," Bolitho said, thoughtfully. "Poor fellow, I did not hear of his madness; I only just knew him."

"But," Cecil continued, "only a few days before I found the I O U, I had been to see the sub-editor of one of the dailies in which your strike articles appear. He was, I learned in the course of my chat, an old Cantab, and had been at the same college as Gainsborough, and he told me that Dick had long since recovered from his attack of insanity, and that, though he led a secluded life at the Grange, and his parents had been dead several years, he went into society, and had recently married. I had not found the I O U then, and had quite forgotten it, but, as I looked at it, recollections poured on me, and my mind was promptly made up. I would go north and visit Dick. We had been friends at Cambridge; in fact, I was the only man he seemed to take to. He would come and smoke for hours in my rooms without saying a word; but I could see he craved for my society—partly perhaps because we were both tykes. 'Oh, well,' I thought, 'I may as well go there as anywhere else. I may get the I O U honoured, for I knew he was well off, and a day's partridge shooting, if things turn out for the best; if not, I shall have had the change of air and scene, and no harm done.' You know it is not every

man who will cash an old I O U dating from his college days, as the general plea is, 'My dear fellow, I have got a sheaf of old I O U's somewhere, and probably some of yours amongst them,' so I was not very sanguine.

"I decided not to bother you, and the day after I found the I O U, I arrived at Hampton Lovett, a little village about three miles from 'Ritherdons,' Gainsborough's place. It is a lonely out-of-the-way part of Yorkshire, and a bleak moor extends for miles round the village and Ritherdons. I put up at the little village inn called the 'Saracen's Head,' the sign dating back to mediæval times, when one of Gainsborough's ancestors had brought back a Saracen slave from the Crusades. The old legend runs that the slave, after having been for years the butt of the rough Saxons, seized his opportunity for revenge, and stealthily crept up the stairs of the watch tower after the lady of their house; that he had held her aloft out of the window, and called to his master to cut off his nose and his ears or he would hurl her down; that the knight drew his sword and obeyed, and as he held the severed members aloft in mute supplication for her safety the slave, goaded to merciless revenge by years of oppression, mocked the sacrifice and hurled her down; and, writhing in torture afterwards, bequeathed his curse of madness to their race.

"The buxom, attractive hostess made me very comfortable after my long railway journey, and

gossiped volubly while I ate a large dish of newly-laid eggs and their concomitant bacon. She had nothing but praise for Madam Gainsborough, of the Grange, who had been the Lady Bountiful of the village since her coming to Ritherdons, about a year before, but she was reticent in her remarks about Dick, and I could see that he was regarded as a 'dark man' by the people of the neighbourhood. There were no other gentry for some miles, she mentioned, except an elderly lady and her daughter, who lived in a little cottage not far off; and a curate, who rode over on Sundays to conduct morning service at the old Norman church, was almost their only visitor from the outward world.

"The Squire, as she called Gainsborough, had sold all the lands the family owned in the neighbourhood except Ritherdons and the ornamental grounds it stood in. I was not surprised at this, for I knew he hated farming, and he had once or twice, in his rare bursts of confidence at Cambridge, informed me of his intention of doing so. I knew his income must be over a couple of thousand pounds yearly, so I was surprised to learn that his establishment consisted only of an old couple, who officiated as butler and cook, and a young woman who filled the dual capacity of housemaid and lady's maid to Mrs. Gainsborough, to whom she was warmly attached. And, further, that in spite of his Yorkshire affection for horses, he had closed the Ritherdons stables, where horses

had been bred for centuries, and on the rare occasions of his requiring any they were hired from my worthy hostess or the village postmaster.

"'There is business method in all that; Dick Gainsborough is evidently sane enough,' I thought, as I rather ruefully remembered the £200 I O U that reposed in my breast-pocket, 'saving for the future little Gainsboroughs, like a model husband. It is very different from his old reckless way of throwing money about at Cambridge. I was as great a fool myself in those days, and should have steadied down too, if I had any money left; however, I am very glad for his sake. I shan't break my heart if he won't cash it. Good luck to him!'—and I drained the last glass of the bottle of rare old claret my hostess had produced, and smoked the calumet of peace.

"The beautiful day was drawing to its close—one of the most lovely parts of a summer's day—with a mellow twilight beauty unknown in gorgeous-foliaged tropical climes—

> 'Where quick her dark limbs hover
> O'er the white limbs of her lover,
> And night seizes fast on day;'

but with linked sweetness long drawn out, with countless varying heavenly hues, an English summer's day sweeps stately over the quiet landscape into the past. From the old ivy-covered church tower I heard the solemn bell—

> 'The curfew tolled the knell of parting day,
> The lowing herd wound slowly o'er the lea.'

And I breathed the soft fragrance of the pure country air, and felt it brace every nerve and fibre with renewed health and strength.

"'You cannot miss Ritherdons, sir,' my pleasant-faced hostess said, as with old-fashioned courtesy she stood in the jasmine and rose-covered porch to speed me on my way; 'go straight along the road until you come to two large iron gates with the Gainsborough coat of arms on them. You will only pass one cottage on your way, where Mrs. Earle and her daughter live.'"

"Eh! what?" said Jim Bolitho.

"Why, my dear fellow, there is no doubt that by an extraordinary coincidence we have met her son, Thomas Merle Earle; you mentioned his name in your last letter. There can be no doubt, formerly wealthy Ceylon coffee-planters, but now ruined. My mother knew them when they lived on the other side of the moors; I had never been this side before. In any case, I should have welcomed Earle for your sake, for I could see he was a gentleman. I deferred mentioning it until I had talked to you."

"Go on," Jim responded.

"'It is just under three miles from here, and a pleasant walk through the woods. A servant will wait up until you return, should you be late,' Mrs. Sykes, my hostess, continued; and I soon passed the straggling thatch-covered houses at the end of the village, and along the old Roman military road. My road lay alternately between

sweet-scented woods and high hedges, rich in their midsummer foliage.

"The lime trees were in flower, and the bees were busy overhead in the blossom-laden boughs, and occasionally a whiff of honeysuckle was borne to me as I passed golden-rock roses, yellow spores of the snapdragon, and great clumps of wild rose bushes that filled the air with their delicate scent. Away over the hayfields, as I left Hampton Lovett, the lark fluttered in the blue, making the air quiver with his singing; the flute-throated blackbird warbled in the hollow recesses of the woods, and the thrush in a holly bush by the wayside sang out his sweet, clear song, as the rising wind awoke a sudden rustling through the woods of birch and oak.

"I passed Mrs. Earle's cottage, a quaint old building, nearly all white, crossed and recrossed with black beams of wood, with odd decorated gables and old diamond-paned lattices. In the garden I caught a glimpse of a maiden, 'a daughter of the gods, divinely tall and most divinely fair,' but with a sigh I hurried on, while I thought of my lost dear love."

Jim sympathetically pressed Cecil's arm, and or a moment neither spoke.

With a start Tarleton recovered, and continued "The banks were high above me on either side, and bright with the summer flowers and the beautiful, rich-coloured blossoms of the hedge-rows of the north country; the pure deep blue of

the large crane's-bill—the *geraneum pretense* of the botanists—shone like bits of blue sky brought down from Heaven amid the green leaves and goose grass. All around me were a profusion of wild flowers, and I longed never to come back to our dreary old Hare Court again. The wild stars of the stitchwort twinkled among the green; the clear red blossoms of the campion shone here and there; and the viscid petals of the 'ragged robin' glimmered a bright crimson as they straggled through the thorny bushes of the hawthorn. Here, too, was the beautiful harebell, the real bluebell of the North, with its slender stem and pellucid colour; and here was its bigger and coarser relative, the great hedge campanula, with its massive bells of azure and its succulent stalk, and yellow masses of snapdragon and an abundance of ferns, white dog-roses and dappled pinks, while violets, purple and white, coyly nestled under loving leaves and shed their fragrance on the air.

"Sudden shafts and gleams of sunlight fell from the uncertain sky, and lit up the wild masses of weeds and flowers by the wayside as the sunbeams struggled through the overhanging trees.

"For a time I forgot everything in the happiness of being in the country again. All brought intoxicating joy—the clustering hedges, the glow of red and yellow in the sky, that stretched in gradations of colour like a wall to the gold and

crimson of the sunset, till it merged into the half-transparent purple of the darker regions of the twilight; and as my eye followed the line of twisted and mighty sky shapes, as the forest grew thinner and my road clearer, the rose-colour deepened into purple, the purple grew darker, and more dark and green and blue began to appear, and a red twilight tinged with grey fell on the land. I had long passed Mrs. Earle's house; I knew not how long I had walked. I had fallen into a reverie, and suddenly remembered I had taken the first path that occurred to me where two roads had met. The twilight deepened, the fleecy clouds grew more and more cold and harsh in outline, till they formed wild masses of slate-coloured mountains in a lowering sky; and I bit my lip with vexation as I abruptly came out of the wood, and noted the fast waning evening and the boundless expanse of moor before me. The brown bracken shone like burnished copper, and the purple and gold heather glowed in the last fiery rays of the setting sun. Far away I could see Holgar's Barrow gaunt and solitary, an ancient temple where grim British Druids had offered up their cruel sacrifices to Baal; its stones standing out in sharp grey relief to deep black clouds that were swiftly rising over the horizon behind it. And even as I looked the red sun sank, a cold wind whistled and moaned across the moor, a covey of frightened partridges whirred past me, the hares and rabbits scuttled

through the underwood to their forms, the tiny birds, shrilly screaming, fled wildly into the woods from the coming storm, the trees trembled and rustled and whispered to each other, and again the cold, dank, earth-smelling wind struck a chill to my heart. The masses of clouds that came rolling over the horizon threw a deeper shadow over the moor. The road had turned yellow-white under the final saffron glow that appeared over the lost sun, and a lowering gloom overspread the whole landscape.

"Even as I looked the black thunderclouds piled on high and rolled over each other in shapeless masses, ever growing blacker and wider over the sky, and occasional gleams of lightning swept across their face as the black shadow swept over the moor."

CHAPTER VI.

"THE stones of Holgar's Barrow grew blurred and indistinct as the driving wall of rain reached them, and were soon hidden from view by the sheets of water that fell from the darkling clouds, and the first drops of the storm fell with a heavy plash on the road.

"I knew the storms of our Yorkshire wolds—equal to tropical storms in their fierce wrath while they lasted, and not to be faced by man or beast; so I turned and hurried back the way I came. The black pall overhead had swept on and over me, and the electricity, attracted by the forest, after its headlong journey over moor and plain, burst in a gleaming network of forked lightning across the inky sky; the thunder pealed and rattled round me, and roared in the re-echoing forest.

"I pressed on, though the darkness was so ntense I could hardly see my hand as I instinctively held it out as I groped my way. A peal of thunder crashed directly overhead, louder than before, simultaneously with a blaze of blue fire that enveloped an ancient oak not fifty yards in front of me. I saw the tree burst out into a fierce

blaze, while its riven limbs crashed to the earth, and by the lurid light of the stricken tree I saw the ancient iron gates of the entrance to the ancestral hall of the house of Gainsborough. I pressed eagerly forward, and the moaning wind swung them sullenly back on their harshly grating hinges to admit me. I passed quickly up the carriage sweep; again the thunder roared, and in the blinding flash, the pile of Ritherdons Hall stood out before me.

"In that momentary light I took in every detail of cunning architecture, embattlements, turrets, stained glass windows, intricate carvings, and massive stone armorial shields bearing the haughty crests of the house of Gainsborough. Proud and defiant the hall stood in the storm, but (it might have been fancy) the dense black thundercloud overhead appeared to have taken the shape of the long-dead Saracen. I could have sworn I saw his gigantic body and head, with its gleaming teeth and eyeballs, where blots of lighter cloud were, its menacing right arm and hand stretched over Ritherdons; and as I looked, appalled, the gleaming lightning seemed again to dart from the cloudy giant's clenched right hand, and the harsh thunder sounded like strident, mocking, triumphant laughter. Cimmerian darkness followed, and the mansion was buried in an impenetrable gloom, save where one window on the ground floor sent rays of parti-coloured light from its stained panes on the path, and where the centre

pane was open, the light from it making a blurr of yellow on the wet ground. A gleam of pure white light like a falling star shot from the window; the pattering raindrops had ceased, and since the last peal of thunder a profound and solemn silence had fallen on all around, so deep that I could hear the faint tinkle as a glittering, serpent-like thing quivered and coiled where it fell at my feet. I picked it up. The choicest mines of Golconda had been sacked to form that magnificent jewel; a queen would have been proud to wear the diamond necklace I held in my hand. For a moment I stood motionless, then pressed forward up the ancient steps. The old oak door was open, and I entered the lofty hall. A parting gleam of lightning as the storm rolled sullenly on showed me the trophies of armour and priceless ancestral portraits that adorned the walls; then again all was dark and silent, save I thought I heard a faint moaning. I listened, but all was still, and, after a moment's irresolution, I turned the handle of the room from whence I had seen the solitary light, and entered. A lady stood at one end of the long apartment, with its single oriel window, and facing me. Her hands were clasped, and a mute look of terror and despair was on her lovely face; the red blood trickled slowly down from her torn ear on to her snowy neck and bosom. A glittering piled-up heap of diamonds lay on the table before her, and a dainty

fan. As I opened the door the other occupant of the room turned fiercely round from the side of the table, where a number of letters—some lying loosely, some tied in bundles—lay scattered on it. A few withered flowers, with a tress of sunny hair, lay near them, and a long, gleaming, old-fashioned dagger.

"'I ordered you not to return to-night,' the gentleman, for he was a gentleman in evening dress, yelled rather than shouted, as he turned to see who the intruder was. He stopped short and looked blankly at me. 'Cecil Tarleton,' he exclaimed, 'here!' I stood aghast; I could see I was in the presence of a raving madman, and of the most dangerous of all classes of madmen—a monomaniac. Sane in other things, but treacherous, artful, and devilishly dangerous to all whom their mad brain connects with their hallucinations.

"With that intuitive, instantaneous mental perception that instinctively comes to aid the body in moments of imminent peril, I grasped the situation. Dick Gainsborough was afflicted with homicidal madness, influenced by monomaniacal jealousy of his wife; and had I been a few seconds later, she would have been dead—slain by her mad husband.

"You know, Jim, as part of our forensic knowledge, we have read all the works that bear on madness in connection with law, and from them I incidentally learned how best to act now. To

save his wife from her instant deadly peril was my one absorbing thought; raging madness had to be met by a strong sane will, devilish cunning by cool stratagem. In an instant my plan of action lay clear before me. I pretended to see nothing abnormal, and advanced with assumed cordiality: 'Won't you welcome your old friend, Dick?' I said, as I looked straight into the shifty, mad eyes. His fell before mine, and I knew that in any intellectual battle I should be conqueror, but should it come to a physical struggle I dreaded the result; and I puzzled how to obtain possession of the ancient weapon without exciting his suspicion. As his eyes fell I flashed a look of encouragement and warning at his pale wife, who stood looking at me with agonised entreaty. I started back. 'Avice Banastre,' I exclaimed, as my lost love stood before me. I had, in a passing thought, wondered what lady could be found who would marry a man who had once been known to have been mad. All was explained now. Neither of us had any money, and we had been parted years before, and she had been forced by her worldly mother into a wealthy match. That Dick had loved her I could see from this terrible scene, so I could but hope that she had been happy until this dread ordeal.

"My exclamation roused him from the dazed reverie in which he had fallen, as his poor troubled brain pieced together the past."

"'You know my wife?' he hissed between his

teeth; 'did you write me those letters? If so, you die with her!'

"All depended on my being prompt and cool. 'I have not seen or heard of your wife for many years, old friend,' I answered, quietly. He looked at me with his cunning madman's eyes, and madmen are so cunning they can often read sane people's thoughts better than the lucubrations of their own unhinged minds can be followed. He saw I was speaking the truth.

"'What brings you here?' he asked, as he nervously shifted his gaze. Anything was important, no matter how trivial, to divert his thoughts from his wife. 'The train brought me from London to-day,' I said; 'see, here is the date on the ticket; my business was this,' and, ever keeping an eye on him, I fumbled in my breast-pocket and handed him the I O U for £200. His clouded eyes glittered; I could see he was sane about the past.

"'Yes,' he said, 'debts of honour; I remember I had a hundred of yours in notes in the early part of that evening; must be paid, yes. I have just the money here,' and he turned to a safe and pulled out a roll of notes. 'There is just £200 here,' he said, as he rapidly ran them over and handed them to me. Again our eyes met and his fell, while with nervous fingers he absently tore to little bits the I O U I handed him, and then he laughed, the hollow joyless laughter of the mad.

"'Rare fun to-night, Cecil—you are just in time to see me kill my wife, ho! ho! and we'll have supper and a game of cards afterwards,' and he rubbed his hands together in ghoulish glee. 'What is that necklace doing here?' he screamed in a sudden access of fury, as his ever-shifting eyes fell on it where I had thrown it on the table. I saw for some unknown reason it irritated him, so I hastily put it in my pocket. 'Take them all,' he shouted, 'I give them to you, my wife gives them to you, ha! ha! the Gainsborough diamonds!' I had gradually moved to get between him and his wife, so as to prevent any sudden rush on his part, and was now opposite the glittering pile of wealth. 'Take them, put them out of sight, or I will hurl them in the tarn.' I was glad to hear him speak like that, as it showed his thoughts were for the moment taken from his wife, and I humoured him by sweeping the gems off the table and placing them with the necklace. 'I give them to you now absolutely, Cecil,' he said; 'we do, eh, Avice, before you die?' 'Yes, dear,' she moaned, 'I never wished to see them again.' 'Enough,' he impatiently said; 'we had business, my dear devil—business; now business is finished comes pleasure, you know; you are going to be killed, and then Cecil and I will have supper—yes, supper and cards, cards,' he added, as he pulled out a pack from the otherwise empty safe, whence he had handed me the roll of notes.

I glanced meaningly at her, as a sudden inspiration seized me. 'No, nonsense, Dick,' I shouted, 'I am not going to have supper with a corpse in the room. Now, did we ever do so at Cambridge?' He seemed to pause and try and think, 'Nor anywhere else,' I boldly added, as I watched the effect of my words. 'No,' he thoughtfully added; 'but we will kill her after supper,' he continued, as his eyes ominously glittered. 'I know a better plan,' I said, pretending to break into a hearty fit of laughter. 'You must have your revenge at cards, you know, for the £200. Now, I should like to kill Mrs. Gainsborough myself. If I lose, you kill her; if I win, I take her away and kill her myself by-and-bye.' Again he broke into a paroxysm of joyless mirth. 'Agreed,' he shouted, and he drew a chair to his side of the table, and with a heavy blow dashed the letters off the table, whence the majority of them fluttered in the air and fell just under the oriel window.

"'Where are the servants?' I whispered, as he hurriedly shuffled the pack. 'All absent, even my lady's maid, who came down stairs from dressing me but a few minutes before I did. It is all a mystery,' she moaned. 'Are you ready?' he said impatiently, as he placed the dagger beside him and motioned to me to take the chair opposite him. 'Glorious idea; which of us will kill my wife?' As he spoke I heard someone, with fumbling, unsteady hands, trying the handle of the door, and I nervously gripped the heavy

chair, for I felt I knew not what fresh horrors might be in store. The door slowly opened, and Avice Gainsborough screamed. A ghastly form appeared of a comely young woman, her hair matted with blood, which had flowed from a large wound on the head, and had poured in streams over her deathly pale face. She tottered into the room, and, with a cry, staggered towards Avice. Dick Gainsborough looked at her for a moment with puzzled curiosity. 'Oh, yes, I remember now,' he said, as he wrinkled his brows and looked furtively at me; 'I had to kill her before I killed Avice. I sent the others away while Avice was putting on her diamonds to please me. Ho, ho! couldn't get rid of this one otherwise,' he said indifferently, turning to me; 'I thought I had killed her in the hall.' I looked sternly at him, and he cowered under my gaze.

"I sat down opposite to him, and pointed for him to be seated. Poor Mrs. Gainsborough saw this, and whispered to the maid, who lay in her arms, and very quietly she reached behind her and gave the wounded girl a glass of wine from the sideboard, and bathed her head with her handkerchief dipped in a carafe of water. Poor Dick took no notice, he was chuckling and muttering to himself, and I feared his thoughts were wandering, 'Are you ready to play?' I peremptorily demanded. 'I am waiting,' he answered, impatiently.

'Now let us clearly understand each other. If you win you kill your wife, and then we have supper; if I win I take her and the maid away and kill her myself to-morrow?'

'Yes, yes, that's it,' he gibbered. 'You will bring me her head to-morrow if you win, won't you? It must be put in the gallery of ancestors.' With difficulty I restrained myself. I had fully decided on a death-struggle if I lost and he attacked Avice, as he certainly would do. I would have given a year of my life to have known how to cheat at cards just then. 'We will play Nap,' he said. 'Whoever wins the most of three games kills my wife?' I nodded. I could hear the faint moaning of the injured girl behind me, as she revived under her mistress's loving ministrations.

"'Cut for deal,' he said, tersely. In this and other matters he was as sane as I am. I cut a ten, he cut seven. 'Your deal,' I said; 'lowest takes it;' he nodded an assent, and after I had cut the cards in the orthodox manner he commenced dealing. You can imagine, Jim, I felt I had a peck of trouble on my hands—two women's lives, one already severely wounded, depending solely on my nerve and judgment; a powerful armed madman sitting opposite me, of whose varying moods I could not be sure one minute. The servants all mysteriously absent, and no possible help nearer than some miles; the thunderstorm muttering and growling in the distance

over the village of Hampton Lovett—no likelihood of any stragglers coming to Ritherdons Grange on such a night—all depended on me.

"When I took up my cards my hand was steady and my nerves steeled. I dared not glance behind me at the trembling women whose lives were the stakes, and who could not tell what I intended doing, and who I felt were watching the play with straining eyes. I had a good hand for two-handed Nap, the ace of spades and ten, the ace of clubs, the king of hearts, and ten of diamonds. 'Four,' I called. 'Play,' came the hissed answer. I led the ace of spades, the seven fell to it; I led the ace of clubs, the ten fell to it; I led the king of hearts, he took it with the ace, and led the king of diamonds, and a fierce yell of triumph burst from him as my ten of diamonds fell to it, and I lost the game.

"'First to me,' he said, and he took up the antique gold-hilted dagger and felt its keen edge as I nervously dealt, after he had punctiliously cut the cards. His brow lowered as he looked at his hand: 'Three.' 'Four again,' I called with renewed hope. I had ace of spades again and two small trumps, the ace of diamonds and the queen of hearts. I led the ace of spades; he replied with the nine of diamonds; I promptly laid down my other two trumps and the ace of diamonds. 'Yes, your game,' he said, 'one and one. You won't omit to bring me my wife's head to-morrow if you win,' he said in an anxious whisper. I affected

an extreme cordiality; now was the crucial time, could I but lull any suspicions he might have. 'You trust to me, old Dick, to do all that is right,' I said heartily, and we looked at our hands. 'Three,' he called. My heart sank; I was afraid he was forcing me to go four and be beaten as in the first game. 'Four,' I shouted desperately. I had the ace, king, and seven of clubs, and two small hearts. I played the ace and king of clubs, his ten and eight of clubs fell to them, and, keeping one trump in reserve, I led my nine of hearts; he took it with the king. But two cards remained to each of us, mine of the two lowest values in the pack, though one was a trump; he led the queen of diamonds; my heart leapt into my throat as I took it with my seven of trumps. I led my seven of hearts, the lowest value card I could have had; he dashed the nine of diamonds on it, and I had won!

"'I claim my stake, your wife,' I shouted, for I was now as excited as he had been, and felt the surging tide of victory rise in me, and braced myself ready for all eventualities. He took the defeat with a gambler's philosophy apparently, but I could see the knotted veins stand out with the beads of perspiration on his forehead. 'Take your stake, and bring me my wife's head tomorrow.' Some process of reasoning was passing through that poor darkened brain that made him harp on that one string, but what it was I never shall know. He turned gloomily on his

heel, and I beckoned to the trembling women to fly.

"Noiselessly they stole to the door, and, snatching two wrappers from the hall table, they fled into the night.

" 'You know you are in honour bound to await my return to-morrow,' I said earnestly, and I glanced at his rack of guns and the canisters of powder ranged underneath.

"He nodded vacantly; he evidently did not understand me, and sat wearily down. And as I passed quietly out of the door, I heard him muttering to himself, 'I shall have the fair, false devil's head to-morrow, to-morrow.'

"Now that the excitement was over, the tears rained down my cheeks as I thought of the wreck my old friend was, and prayed Heaven I might rather die than such a calamity ever overtake me. I hurried through the ancient iron gates and soon overtook the trembling women, whose dark wrappers made them hardly discernible in the gloom. How I half led, half supported them over those miles to Hampton Lovett I cannot tell. At last we reached the village and the friendly shelter of the 'Saracen's Head.'"

CHAPTER VII.

"AMID a thousand ejaculations of pity and wonder, Mrs. Sykes received the fainting lady and her half-dead companion, while I hurried to secure help and go back to save poor Dick from himself. The tap-room was full of willing aid when I had told the story, and those who were disinclined to go were promptly frightened into coming.

"'What is to say, sexton? I forget,' the solitary policeman asked. 'In the name of the ——,' quavered the old sexton, whose duty it had been to ring the curfew bell for the preceding half century. 'No, no,' broke in Mrs. Sykes' son, a stalwart young farmer; 'in virtue of my office I call on all able-bodied men.'

"'Ay, ay, that's it,' quavered the sexton, 'all able-bodied men to accompany me in King George's name.'

"'No, no, Victoria's, on this mission of peril,' said the policeman pompously. 'Now, you Giles and Hodges, I've got my eye on yer; off we goes,' and, a strong body of men, we started for Ritherdons at a brisk run.

"The thunderstorm had rolled away, the stars

had come out, and the sky shone blackly blue, save over the wood, where it had a dull, roseate tinge. 'What is that?' I said to young Sykes, as I pointed to it. 'It's the Northern Lights, sir—the Aurora Borealis, as learned folk call them. Up here in the North we sometimes call it the Merry Dancers. Sometimes the whole sky, from the village to over the moor, is a deep blood-colour. See, it is getting deeper already,' he said, as we neared Ritherdons Hall; 'it's a sign of stormy weather and evil times.'

"We were passing in at the gates of Ritherdons as he spoke, and a cry of horror broke from us. The reflection in the sky was not the Northern Lights, but Ritherdons Grange was on fire, and beginning to blaze in different places.

"As we reached the front of the house, the fire had reached the canisters of powder in the room where Gainsborough and I had played, and with a muffled roar they exploded, blowing out the stained oriel window, which fell in a tinkling shower on the drive, and scattering the half-burned letters over the lawn. But we hardly heeded the explosion, all were gazing at the shadowy form that was hurrying from window to window, and wherever it had been for a moment a bright light shone.

"'Can we do nothing?' I asked in agony. 'Nothing, sir. Ritherdons was rebuilt in Queen Anne's reign; it's mostly timber; the buckets we might find in the outhouses would be as useless

as thimbles; besides, the poor mad squire has fired it in a dozen places, there's no engine nearer than a dozen miles, and like as not the folks will think the lights are the Merry Dancers.'

"'Merry Dancers, indeed,' I thought, sorrowfully, as I watched the sparks and misty smoke fly upwards. Perhaps some of these letters may help explain the mystery,' I thought, as I stooped and picked some half-burnt fragments up from the showers that had fluttered from the oriel window, blown out by the explosion. 'Collect those papers for me,' I called, and a dozen willing hands collected what there were and gave them to me.

"'Have a care, sir!' shouted a voice, and the sharp crack of a gun sounded above the roar of the flames, and a bullet whizzed past my ear, 'the squire is firing at you.' We looked up. Poor Gainsborough was at one of the highest windows busy loading, his form looming out blackly. Again he fired, and a shrill scream of pain told of a wounded man.

"The whole crowd, the policeman leading, closely followed by Hodge and Giles, together with the '*posse comitatus*'—who had been armed with two rusty-headed staves as emblems of their authority—fled in wild confusion, and young Sykes and I were left alone gazing at the burning Grange.

"Dick gave a yell and hurled his rifle at us from the window and disappeared. Shortly afterwards the room he had been in began to glow with light,

and amid a shower of sparks and flames the roof crashed in, and a short while after all that was left of the ancestral house of the Gainsboroughs was a ruin of blackened walls, while the last of his race had disappeared in its blazing furnace.

Slowly and sadly we returned to the 'Saracen's Head.'

"Next day Mrs. Gainsborough and her maid were in the delirium of fever, and after I had bespoken the kindly nursing of Mrs. Earle and her daughter, as I could do then nothing more, I came back to welcome you. You may think me heartless," Cecil said in conclusion, "but it was the best for the present. I shall have to return soon, and I was glad to have the pleasant distraction of last night. That there is some evil mystery connected with poor Dick and Avice I know; that she is pure as snow I feel as sure as there is a Heaven. I will devote myself to unravelling the mystery and proving her innocence, whether Dick be living or dead. I consider I hold the diamonds in trust for her and him, and the proceeds of what I raise on them shall be devoted to this purpose.

"With regard to the £200, that we will talk about with Earle when we get back. I have spent about £60 in getting our things; the rest is as much yours as mine."

Jim nodded thoughtfully as they turned homewards and went with the ever-increasing human tide into the Middle Temple.

While Bolitho and Tarleton had been absent, Tom Earle had so far ingratiated himself into Mrs. Jukes' good graces that she had borrowed a bath "for that 'ere affable gent wot's a stoppin' with my gents; they've all 'ad a bit o' luck lately, surely," she confidentially informed the other old crone who "did for" the learned barrister who lived on the ground floor.

"We've bin a making wot 'e calls a sailing devil. I had a taste, unbeknownst to him, and lor! Mrs. Scroggins, I've bin and burnt my blessed tongue clean off; but 'e's tipped me a bob, so, if yer will come, we'll 'ave a drop o' summat short at the 'George,' and drink their good 'ealths; and thank ye kindly for lendin' me the bath. I've brought yer about a pound of their 'am on the quiet."

"Thank ye, mum. I've nicked 'arf a pot o' jam and three sausengers; my gent won't miss 'em." And the two old Temple "laundresses" ambled contentedly off.

Except that Jim choked over the hot ingredients after the plain fare at the docks, and had to be thumped on the back, the curry was a great success, requiring libations of beer in its honour, drunk out of the redeemed prize pewter which an enthusiastic, whooping crowd of Cambridge undergraduates had presented to him and Cecil on the occasion of their winning the University Challenge pair-oar race on the river.

"You mentioned that your late mother knew

mine," Earle said to Tarleton, after they were comfortably settled and Mrs. Jukes had retired with a succession of bobs. "From what Bolitho said at the docks, I hoped such was the case. I should be glad, if you don't mind, to tell you somewhat in detail how I came to be there."

"Fire away, we are all attention," Cecil responded. "Take a pull at the pewter first and shove it this way."

Earle did so, and began: "My chief reason for wishing to tell you of my unique experiences, and of the special secret I alone possess, is, that I think they may prove the means of obtaining a fortune for us, could we but command some little capital."

Tarleton glanced at Bolitho, who gave a comprehensive nod.

"I have been in England now some years, and have been the butt of the shafts and arrows of outrageous fortune, but I have always led my mother and sister to suppose I was doing fairly well. They are too poor to help me, and to have told them otherwise would only have distressed them. I will begin from the last day of my prosperity."

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CHAPTER VIII.

"'A HARD day's work done, and by people, dusky though they are, as good subjects as any in the Queen's dominions, God bless her,' I thought as I closed my day-book with a snap, and nodded in response to my salaaming Kanganies, while I watched my six hundred Tamil coolies wending in picturesque groups to their lines; many of the men carrying their babies astride of their hips, and all chattering and laughing like a flock of parrots. The bright, parti-coloured cumblies of the ear and nose-ring bedecked women, the snowy jackets and gold-edged purple turbans of the head men, and the brown bodies of the rank and file of the men and boys rendering them in the distance, against the vivid green of the background of the sub-tropical vegetation, not unlike some noisy conclave of monkeys and paroquets who, for the nonce, had descended from their usual perches in the Ceylon jungle.

"'What a glorious crop we have,' I said in Tamil, as I looked over my estate from the barbecue, and turned to my head Kangany, who had lingered near me.

"'Yes, Dorey,* I know such a sight as we now look on has never been seen before on earth,' and I nodded affirmatively, for I knew what my aged servant said was true.

"Never before on earth, as he said, and probably never again, will there exist such a scene.

"'Lax-a-pane,' the coffee estate, was bearing the 'bumper crop' of all the estates in the island in the halcyon year of 1873. Though under 300 acres in extent, the sturdy coffee trees bowed down under a weight of £11,000 worth of coffee, the berries, bearing an exact resemblance to luscious deep-red cherries, glowing and blazing under the slanting rays of the setting sun as it sank behind the perpendicular precipice of Peacock Hill, over which the avenging British force had driven the hapless Kandyan King's forces in utter rout but a generation before.

"Art and nature combined in perfection had united to produce the magnificent result; perfect climate, a virgin alluvial soil, and abundant willing native labour had then made Ceylon one of the most prosperous colonies in the world.

"The coffee-trees, which otherwise would have grown into long saplings, had been carefully lopped off when five feet high, with the result that the centre limb had grown up sturdily, as thick as a man's arm, and had thrown out primary and secondary branches, now weighed

* Tamil for "master."

down by the ruby berries and long dark green leaves.

"'Any game trapped for my dinner party to-night?' I said to the head man; 'I have been so busy I forgot to ask. The visiting agent from the Oriental Bank is coming to estimate the crop and make the money advances. I must feed him well, you know, Mootan.'

"The estate coolies' wages, not forgetting those of his four wives and his own perquisites, and his wages of a halfpenny a day for each of the 600 coolies, loomed before Mootan's eyes, and his ivory teeth showed themselves as he replied: 'We knew the Sahib was coming; deer and jungle fowl are already in the cookboy's hands'; and with an answering smile I strolled up to the bungalow.

"The large bath-room adjoining was filled with cool water, brought down from the mountain stream in long bamboo pipes; the sleek Appoo, with a high tortoiseshell comb stuck in his crest, had laid out the welcome change of evening dress; the beer-bottles, wrapped in wet cloths, were hanging in a draught, and I re-entered my roomy, foliage-covered verandah feeling 'jolly comfortable.' 'Bohoi-beer!' 'Salaam, Sahib; yes, Sahib,' came the echo; and the Singhalese Appoo trotted in. 'Appoo, if you let anybody bother me until you hear the cooee of the coming masters—though it's against my religion—I'll eat you!' The Appoo grinned. 'Is everything ready?'

"'All ready, sar; I done go finish now.'

"To all outward seeing, everything combined to make me happy—perfect health, no debts, blessed with such a wealth of Nature's gifts as had *never* been showered on man in such a space before; for fully two-thirds of the crop the young estate was bearing was clear profit; popular, happy in all home relations, heart-whole. 'What more,' I dreamily thought, 'can man desire?' But as one thought followed another, I grew troubled and anxious, and, hurriedly rising, I went to my office and locked the door. Furtively I brought out from my safe a long, withered branch, and, placing it on my desk before me, subjected it to patient scrutiny.

"'I cannot make it out,' I muttered, as I took the dead, dry thing in my hand. 'One of the finest branches on the estate—a primary, too; the secondaries and leaves all faded and wan. There is a good half-pound of coffee berries on it too, all shrivelled and noisome; no jungle rat or monkey has gnawed it, no lightning flash, no mark to explain its sudden death,' and I nervously plucked the berries off. As I did so a faint, evil odour from them filled the office. Again I looked at the withered wreck; only the closest scrutiny could have seen a minute groove running diagonally through where it had snapped off by its own superincumbent weight; but that tiny mark bore no meaning to my mind.

"'Suppose all the estate went accursed like

this ill-omened thing!' and I paled and shuddered.

"'No, nonsense!" as I thought of the wealth of pure coffee that grew around me, and, in lesser degree, for many a league of fertile mountain.

"'I will trouble myself and no one else about it,' and I broke the dead branches, coffee berries and rusty leaves, into a shapeless mass, and threw it amid the rosebeds that ornamented the bungalow.

"'I have searched everywhere for another like it; the veriest trifle, some slight accident of a bit of poisoned soil from a dead cobra, perhaps'—I had killed that day a cobra near the place—and I heard the faint 'cooee' of my coming guests, and saw the body of horsemen on the hill. Down they galloped from the gap, and the bungalow soon resounded with noisy congratulations.

"'While my brother planters were engaged in taking observations of the sky through the bottoms of various glasses and tankards, I took the grave and kindly old agent of the Oriental Bank to his room and made him welcome.

"'Old chap,' whispered my friend Bob Singleton as I came back, 'old Macfarlane is regularly gone on your crop; I never heard him praise any estate so much before. You are sure to get all the advances you ask.'

"'I hope I shall,' I said, laughing. 'I have now had eight years' hard work, and I want to go home; you shall be my agent, and I will come

back and get appointed local magistrate, and after a few years we will settle in England with fortunes and enter Parliament.'

"'Right you are,' said Singleton, 'I'll act for you. Go to old Macfarlane now, and you can get all business done by dinner-time, and sit down with a good appetite; the boys know what he has come for, and won't mind, and I'll keep them amused.'

"And all my business arrangements were entirely satisfactory when, with Macfarlane at my right hand, I took the head of my pretty flower-decked dinner-table, and bade the agent and my brother planters welcome.

"The freshly-caught green turtle and snow-white seerfish, brought up-country by relays of coolies, who, at intervals of ten miles running, had relieved each other of the blanket-wrapped, ice-surrounded package; the hot, rich curries, the haunch of venison and gram-fed sirloin of beef, the plump, wild-rice-fed snipe and spice-filled jungle fowl, the Stilton cheese and the preserved plum-pudding from England, the dessert of tropical fruits, crowned by the luscious mangosteen, in size and colour like red billiard-balls, in acorn-shaped cups of vivid green, were as great a success as the liquids, from the palm-tree arrack punch to the final bumpers of iced Catawba champagne, which, with musical honours in various keys, were drained to the health of our far-off Queen. The broad jalousies leading to the passion-flower-

covered verandah were open, and the sub-tropical moon sparkled on the ready-laid card and smoking tables, and lit up the beds of roses where I had thrown the dead branch.

"A sickly-sweet heavy scent from the ripe tons of coffee on the trees mingled with the softer fragrance of flowers and the bouquets of the wines. A storm of cheers welcomed my speech of thanks for their wishes for my prosperity, and my heart throbbed as I looked for a moment over my ruby-tinted fields; but even as I looked, my eyes fell on the bed of roses, and I started and trembled. There, in the midst of the flowers, a huge and ghostly cobra seemed to rear its menacing crest; its baleful eyes glittered at me, and I fancied I saw the withered branch held crossways in its jaws. I stopped and gazed at it, while Macfarlane looked intently at me under his shaggy brows. With a start I recovered myself, and when I glanced affrightedly at the flowers again the form was gone.

"'It's nothing, boys; I saw a cobra outside, the companion, probably, of one I killed to-day, and it startled me for a moment. I have been overworked lately, as you know, and that reminds me; thanks all round. Through the good offices of our friend Macfarlane and the Oriental Bank, I can wind up by announcing I am going home for some years.'

"A chorus of cheers and regrets at losing me followed, and, rising tumultuously, we sought the

cool verandah for a game of Van John and Trichinopoly cheroots.

"'It will take me a month more to pick, pulp, and send the crop to Colombo. Thank Heaven, it must be off the trees, now it is fully ripe, within a few days. My perfect success has overtaxed my brain,' I thought.

"'Earle, my lad,' a quiet voice fell on my ear. I started and turned. Macfarlane was looking at me under his beetling brows.

"'I am an old Highlander; I have the gift of second-sight. Sometimes I can help, sometimes only warn; I cannot tell which to-night, but, dear lad, this I do know, you will be surely in need of one or the other. Can you tell me nothing?'

"I flushed and laughed. 'No, thanks, nothing. Look at my teeming acres. I am young, and well, and strong; hey for England.'

"'You will let me off joining you all now, I am tired and old,' Macfarlane responded sadly, and, with quick compunction, I offered him my arm, and sedulously attended him until I had seen him quietly asleep.

"'There is your hand, you old dawdler,' said Singleton, as I entered the verandah; 'we have played five rounds, what will you go?'

"'Double on both,' I said, as I showed two aces and received two kings.

"'Take your money,' said the dealer, with a laugh. 'A bumper crop, and now a bumper hand.'

"'Why, I have won my passage-money home,' I said a few hours later; 'I am as lucky as Crœsus.'

"'That is an unlucky simile,' Singleton answered, who, like the rest of the planters present, was a man of good family and a public school man. 'Don't you remember Herodotus tells us he came an awful smash?'

"I started nervously as I thought of the mysterious dead branch I had found that day, and the inexplicable vision I had seen, but I replied carelessly, 'Oh, well, Crœsus picked up again all right, and became friend to King Darius' son, and found a new fortune.'

"'I have a long journey before me to my estate,' Singleton responded. 'See, the dawn is breaking, and I can hear the preliminary strumming of the tom-toms in your lines. Last deal and drink—here goes!' and after a dawn-supper of devilled bones, fresh-plucked oranges, and tea, the horses were brought round and the cavalcade scattered like a broken string of beads.

"A short while afterwards I was standing by my friend Bob Singleton, who had come to Colombo to see me off, watching the fireflies dart in and out of the myrtle-boughs, and listening to the muffled roar of the breakers before me as they broke in broad splashes of phosphorescent light on the shell-covered beach. The Singhalese beach-combers ran down the surf-boat into the glittering sea.

"'Your time has come, dear old man; once more farewell,' Bob said; 'something tells me we shall never meet again!' and the last I ever saw of him was his kindly figure waving a farewell from the shore as the outrigger swept over the foam-crested breakers to the homeward-bound steamer. From the taffrail of the vessel I took a long last look at the spice-scented, palm-tree lined shores of my Eastern home. The engine throbbed, the steamer surged forward, and we went westward into the night."

CHAPTER IX.

"I HAD been in England some years, and had just returned from the Continent. 'What, Sykes the bookmaker?' I said, on the morning after my arrival, surprised as I looked at the card the maidservant brought me. 'Are these two letters all that have come for me since I have been on the Continent?'

"'Yes, sir.'

"'Oh, well, the one from the Oriental Bank can keep; I'll read the other from Bob Singleton after Sykes has gone. I have paid all bets I have had, though I have lost latterly,' I thought, as I looked round my pretty bachelor chambers and wondered what Sykes wanted.

"Bits of carved jackwood furniture from Ceylon, the work of patient Singhalese artificers, the best carpenters the world produces, Aden tapestry and Eastern china, a few photographs in plush frames of ladies who knew they had shapely arms and dimpled elbows, and did not mind the world knowing of their possessions, oil-paintings of the Hungarian-bred Mineral colt, which, in 1876, as Kisber, romped in for the Derby, paintings of the double victories of Silvio

in 1877, when he carried off the Blue Ribbon and the St. Leger, of the dead-heat between the Oxford and Cambridge crews of the same year, large coloured photographs of my alma mater, Harrow-on-the-Hill, and of Lord Beaconsfield, a trophy of fencing foils over masks and boxing gloves, facing a fox brush over a crossed hunting crop and otter-spear, a pink card of admission to the drag enclosure at Ascot, a couple of dainty ball programmes on the mantelpiece, and a few red morocco-covered members' admission tickets to various theatres, and known to the initiated as 'bones,' told pretty well the story of my life for some years past.

"'I heard at the club you had returned, Mr. Earle, so I thought I'd come and see you at once,' the bookmaker said after a brief greeting, looking at me with his steely grey eyes.

"'Didn't you get my cheque? I posted it to you in time for that settling Monday.'

"'Yes, I got it,' was the response. 'For £185; here it is,' and he held it out.

"I gasped and bounded to my feet; 'what! returned dishonoured?—impossible.'

"My evident surprise and dismay somewhat softened the bookmaker, who was a good fellow.

"'I thought, mebbe, your remittance from Indy hadn't come. I've told no one; not that sort.'"

"Yes, I know him; he is good Yorkshire sort," Cecil interrupted; "it's dry work talking; shove

that cup round. His mother keeps the 'Saracen's Head.'"

"'I don't understand it, Sykes; here's a letter from the Oriental Bank a month old,' and I hurriedly tore it open, but it merely contained a curt request for an immediate interview. Not even 'N.S.' on it, 'refer to drawer,' I muttered amazedly. 'Why, I have a plantation in Ceylon worth fifty times that cheque; I'll go to the City at once, but I won't keep you waiting here,' I said, as I took up a leather-covered case. 'This is my jewellery, it's worth £500; pawn it for what it will fetch and pay yourself, and let me have all the balance.'

"The leviathan bookmaker smiled superior. 'I don't do sich things, Mr. Earle; but look'ee,' he said, lapsing into Yorkshire, as he generally did when excited, 'thou art main good sort, and flummoxed o'er ta brass; ma trap be down stairs; I'll send moi clerk ta pawnshop, thee coom wi' me and have a bite and sup and a bottle of champagne, and then thee can tackle ta chaps in City.'

"I was too dazed to refuse, and it was not until our lunch was over and I had a good share of a bottle of champagne that I began to vaguely speculate as to the mistake I felt sure had been committed. The entrance of the bookmaker's clerk roused me from my reflections. 'Osborne and Gall, next the Law Courts, advanced £200 on the jewellery, sir; here is the pawn-ticket and money.'

"'Here you are, Sykes, that leaves me £15 over. What odds King Darius to a tenner?'

"'Well, seeing it's you, sir, I'll spring a point. Seven to one.'

"'All right, here's the money, as the race is run to-morrow.'

"'Feel better now, Mr. Earle?'

"'Yes, I am sure there is a mistake; I can tackle them now.'

"'Very good, sir; if ever you want to sell that ticket I'll give you £50 for it.'

"'Oh, I shan't have to do that,' I replied, laughing; 'thanks all the same. I'm off to the bank now; good-bye.' Walking with nervous haste, I soon reached the bank.

"'The head manager has been expecting to see you for some months, Mr. Earle,' the cashier said, and his face fell. A cold thrill, as of a presentiment of coming evil, swept over me as I noted the grave look, and I pressed forward and entered the private room.

"A batch of Ceylon newspapers received that day were on the table, and the manager was reading one with knitted brows. He looked up and laid it down.

"'Be seated, Mr. Earle.' I faced him, and braced my energies, for I could feel bad tidings in the very air.

"'You have not answered our letters,' was the opening shot.

"'I have been on the Continent; I——'

"'Independently of that, have you ceased to take an interest in Ceylon affairs?'

"I felt I flushed guiltily. 'Well, for several years I have not troubled; my estate, as you know, has barely paid its expenses since that bumper crop. It needs time to recuperate, but will soon get straight. My agent, Mr. Singleton, has mentioned the coffee-blight, but he is a croaker. The curator of Kew Gardens has gone out to find a remedy; it must soon pass off, and one good crop will repay all your advances. I have only lived on my savings and the few thousands I have borrowed from you, over and above the advances for working the place. There was no practical use in my going back; Mr. Singleton is as careful a planter as I am, and it saves a double expense. He visits the estate regularly for me.'

"'Good and specious arguments, Mr. Earle,' responded the manager drily. 'None so blind as those who won't see. You mentioned your estate; it is better to speak plainly at once. You have no estate; you have nothing whatever in the island of Ceylon, except debt.' I looked blankly at the manager.

"'The ruin is universal, for the hard-working, stay-on-his-estate planter, and for gay butterflies of fashion like you. Man, man, I pity you all. We have foreclosed on the majority of the estates; what have we for our advances? Listen,' and, rapidly turning over some piles of corre-

spondence, he read: 'Mr. Earle's estate, Lax-a-pane, where the blight first appeared, is a fair type; every coffee-tree is a broken, blackened stump; the leaves and branches lie round it like a mound of dust; every stroke of the hoe applied round the roots reveals devouring insects; the machinery is rusting in the ravine; for many miles the white chimneys of the bungalows are all that is visible over the rank vegetation; the rotten roofs have fallen in.' 'This is the last report, Mr. Earle. Mr. Macfarlane has taken all he had left, and gone, with those who could afford it, to the Fiji Islands. Here are the Ceylon papers received to-day,' and, with grim courtesy, he pointed out a paragraph to me. 'We earnestly hope no more young Englishmen will come to us; 400 of our best planters are wandering about the island penniless.'

"'Tell me the worst at once,' I said, as I sprang to my feet.

"'There is £23 to your credit here; you can have that, and then your account with us is closed. Sign this cheque.'

"I did so; the manager touched a handbell. 'Notes and gold for this amount. Your old friend, Robert Singleton, is dead, we learn to-day. Here is a large sealed packet containing documents he desired should be sent to you.'

"'I have an unopened letter of his at home,' I exclaimed, in agony.

"'He died a few days after writing, slipped and

fell over a precipice near his estate—a ruined man like the rest. Everything seems black now. Mauritius is nearly as bad as Ceylon. We would have spared you the humiliation of returning your cheque, but you gave us no opportunity. Here is the amount of your balance, Mr. Earle,' he continued, rising abruptly as the clerk returned. 'You must excuse me; I am very busy.'

"Mechanically I took the money, and absently bowed, the manager returning my salute with a sharp business *congé*.

"For a moment I stood, as many another planter had stood, on the steps, while I looked with unseeing eyes on the surging city tide of humanity. My ruin was so unexpected—so sudden. Singleton's letters had been buoyant and hopeful, and I had not been on the spot to see how the planters kept a brave front and refused to acknowledge to the world or themselves, to the very last, the ruin their insidious foes had brought on them. Borer, *hæmelia vastatrix*, the tiny worm whose track I had been the first to see, leaf-blight, and 'coffee bugs' had wrought their work, and the coffee industry of Ceylon had crashed to its fall.

"The reaction had now come on, and as I dimly began to realize my ruin, I trembled like an aspen leaf. 'Stop at the Bodega, cabby,' as I hailed a hansom.

"'Yes, sir,' responded my critic aloft, who knew the City, and saw the look in my eyes.

"'Ere we are, sir,' he called out, cheerily. 'Bitter, thank yer honour; I takes sperrits when work is done,' he replied, as I tossed down the brandy. 'See the paper, sir, about Seven Dials Sam's fight with the Yankee yesterday?'

"'No,' I wearily answered.

"'Well, yer honour, Sam was reg'lar down, and last round would ha' finished him. The Yankee had been nipping old rye, and was mad. "'Ave a drop of lush, Sam?" sez his second. "No, I won't," sez Sam; "stow the drink, I'll have a suck at the lemon and at him agen," and he beat un'; and he looked at me. I held out my hand and grasped the old driver's warmly; and the good old jarvey knew I understood, and was happy.

"'Yes, he is right,' I thought, as I went in,' and now to look things squarely in the face. After I know my pecuniary position I can better read Singleton's last letters and know how to carry out his last wishes. A fiver left from this morning—the tenner is sure to be lost, so I won't reckon on the bet; a pound's worth of silver and copper, the £23 from the bank, and I anxiously calculated what reserve cash I had in hand as I opened my cash-box—a hundred-franc note, a napoleon, and some francs (relics of my Continental trip), five sovereigns wrapped in a ten-pound note (put away for emergencies), a mohur, two spade guineas, and three forgotten ten-rupee Oriental Bank Corporation notes was

all that rewarded my search, as I ruefully spread them out on the table—total, say, £56; 'the furniture will pay my debts'—and for the first time I began to realize how wholly dependent on myself I was. My mother had received an income of £300 a year out of my estate as her jointure, and I had paid her the money yearly out of the funds I had borrowed from the bank, as I had always hoped the estate would recover and produce the income it had done before. No one could help me; all the planters I had known were as hard hit as myself, and I smiled bitterly as I thought of help from my club acquaintances.

"'I have plenty of clothes; my poor jewellery, I'll take Sykes' offer of £50 for the voucher. I'll have a man in and sell the best things and write resigning my clubs and things at once,' I decided. I got better prices for my Ceylon furniture than I expected, and after I had gone round to all my creditors and settled my accounts, I found I was free from debt, but with all the money I had received for my goods and chattels gone; and when night had fallen I had despatched all necessary letters, and, worn out with worry and excitement, I fell into a troubled sleep, for I again thought I saw the mateless cobra, not menacing this time, but reared triumphantly aloft over my ruin.

"Sykes was my early visitor next morning. 'You did the fair and square thing yesterday,

Mr. Earle,' he said, 'so I have come to you at once. King Darius won, and here's yer £80.'

"'I am glad,' I said warmly; 'no luck ever happened at a better time. You were right, Sykes, yesterday; I'll take £50 for the voucher.'

"'Very good,' imperturbably replied the book-maker, 'here are the notes'; and I handed him the ticket, and the busily-engaged leviathan hurried off. I had about £195 altogether, I reckoned, as I looked round my dismantled rooms; and I wrote to my mother sending her £150 and telling her all. Independently of the income she derived from Lax-a-pane, my sister and she had an income from Consols of about £100 a year, and they at once moved to a cottage near Hampton Lovett."

Tarleton nodded assent as he listened.

"I moved at once into cheap lodgings, where the first thing I did was to open my dead friend's letter, and the sealed parcel forwarded to me through the Oriental Bank Corporation, in accordance with the custom of the island, by the local authorities, who had taken charge of his effects. First I read his last letter, written a few days before his fatal accident.

"Reading his last letter as I did, knowing that Azreel, the Angel of Death, was even then hovering over him, I could see that—

> "'The sunset of life gave him mystical lore,
> And coming events cast their shadow before.'

"Even his brave heart was broken over the universal ruin that had come upon us; the Oriental Bank Corporation had even that day written to him foreclosing on his coffee plantation. But, he wrote to me, he could see a silver lining to the black cloud—if not for him, for me. Finding time hang heavily on his hands, there being nothing to superintend on his ruined acres, he had gone on hunting trips in the vast unexplored jungles of Ceylon. That on one trip, accompanied by a solitary coolie, he had penetrated deep into the forest; that he had come upon a mighty precipice carved deep with the gods and symbols of a long-forgotten and extinct race; that the 'little monsoon' had come earlier than was expected, with its accompanying deluge of rain; that while he and his boy had cowered under a wild nutmeg tree, looking at the gloomy temple carved in the rock, there had been a slight landslip, and that he saw the mighty mass that blocked up the lofty doorway slip forwards till there was a small aperture large enough for a man to crawl in; that the storm had rolled away, and next morning his reluctant coolie had made native torches, and, leaving the pallid and trembling Tamil outside, he had crawled in; how he had passed from hall to hall, covered with bright paintings of unknown gods and men; how that he had penetrated to a tiny secret chamber, which an accidental stumble revealed to him by his slipping against the

wall, and how the cylinder of stone that formed the door had yielded to his touch; that he had hurriedly glanced round, and, as his torch went out, had grasped at the glittering objects he saw near him, and thrust them in the bosom of his hunting dress. How, when he had returned to the blessed daylight once more, he had examined them and found he had a piece of broken 'chetty" or pot of the rarest antique blue china, and that his other two treasure trove consisted of a long pure gold nail or pin, such as was worn by the high-born dames of that long-forgotten race to fasten up their tresses, and a black and shapeless lump; how that a 'must,' or rogue elephant, had charged and slain his boy as they returned to his ruined home; how that he had carefully washed the black lump in acids and water until it had gleamed forth in its pristine brilliancy as an unknown god of pure and heavy silver, a huge sapphire gleaming in its forehead; how that the Big Monsoon was setting in, but that as soon as the tropical rain had ceased he intended to explore the cave alone. That in case any accident should happen to him, he now enclosed me the plan and bearings of the temple, which I, Tom Earle, have ever since worn next my heart, and that he bade me hope for happier times for both of us and bade me God speed.

"I reverently laid the letter down, penned by the now dead hand, and turned to the sealed

packet to learn and obey his last wishes. There was no reference to the idol in the curt official document sent me; but I did not expect any, knowing the native character as I did. I knew that its existence had been promptly made known, and that, though both Tamils and Singhalese are amongst the most honest people in the world, in this case it would be a race between the two religions of Buddha and Rama Swamy as to who would first secure, by fair means or foul, the, to the rival creeds, sacred embodiment that he had mysteriously obtained (and, in their belief, had been slain for obtaining) of one of their multifarious and impalpable gods. An auction had been held at the up-country bungalow to sell Singleton's effects, in accordance with the usual custom, but with the exception of the Ratemahatmya, or Singhalese chief of the district, and a few planters, in those depressed times no one had attended; and, in response to the official inquiry as to my instructions with regard to the small balance, I wrote by the return mail it was to be given to the clergymen of Kandy to be used as deemed best by them. A letter containing a few trembling lines of farewell enclosed a more elaborate plan, but which, to those ignorant of the secret, meant only meaningless dots and lines.

"Well, it is an old story. Trying to get employment in London, my little capital had gone at one fell swoop, stolen by a specious employer who absconded; and, more fortunate than most,

for some years I was clerk to a Ceylon firm I had known, at a pound a week, until they, too, failed. Then I lived, I can hardly tell you how, until at last the end was not far off. I felt and almost welcomed it, as I dreamily lay back in the seat. The morning was still young; the garden of the Thames Embankment was gay with flowers and lively with the prattle of children who, under the watchful care of nurses and governesses, were playing in the warm sunshine. The previous night I had slept on the seats lining the Embankment, until the biting sea wind, coming up the reaches of the Thames with the tide in the cold grey hours of the dawn, had chilled and numbed me, and forced me for the last hour to wander about making imaginary rendezvous with myself in various parts of the metropolis, and anon hurrying in feverish haste to keep them. The previous morning had seen me the possessor of twopence, which I had spent in a scone and half a pint of porter; since then, save a drink or two of water at the fountain at the entrance of the British Museum, where I had a reader's ticket and earned a precarious existence as a literary hack, nothing had passed my lips. I was more utterly solitary now in teeming London than I had ever been when in the primeval forests of Ceylon. Pictures of pleasant picnics up the river, shivering tramps along the Embankment, warm armchairs in my late clubs, cold benches in the parks, recollections of pleasant little dinners and the pangs of gnawing hunger

all wove a woof of silk and rags, intermingled in my bedazed brain till they seemed to twist a misty cobweb around it, and I must have fainted.

"My unconsciousness must have lasted some considerable space of time, for when I had slowly returned to sentient existence the nurses and their charges had all left the gardens, the last couple disappearing through the gates as I looked towards them. As they left the gardens the little child pointed to me and said something, but the nurse, who had evidently noticed I had fainted, hurried it away. As I sat up I noticed on the seat near me a large piece of plum cake, which had been slightly nibbled by tiny teeth, and a crumpled piece of silver tissue paper. There was no one else in the gardens, so I seized the cake and eagerly ate it. Carelessly opening the bit of tissue paper, I found a new penny and equally bright sixpenny piece. Here was untold wealth to me in my position. The baby evidently had the new coins given it that morning, and had been playing at the seat when my pallor had attracted the attention of the nurse, and made her hurry it away. 'It's an ill wind that blows nobody good,' I reflected; 'here goes for a toss to decide for a restaurant and a cup of coffee and roll or a sandwich and pint of beer at the Blue Posts. Tails! all right, coffee for ever.' I soon found a place outside the gates, and, my modest refection

concluded, carelessly glanced over the morning paper and wondered what I should do next. The dock strike was two days old, and my eye caught the advertisement for hands. Five minutes afterwards I was on my way to the West India Wood Docks, and by next morning was busily at work, and met the 'reporter' here," nodding at Jim, "and—you know the rest."

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CHAPTER X.

"Good business," Tarleton said; "we will have the treasure out of that. I expect you are pretty dry talking. There is one bottle left of the champagne; mix a cup, Jim, while I bring our assets, and we'll resolve ourselves into a committee of ways and means. Here, first, is the money we have in hand," he said when he returned; "here's the tenner your articles fetched, Jim, and here's £140 left out of the £200 poor Dick Gainsborough paid me—the rest went in rehabilitating us."

"And here is my six pounds, if it is of any use," said Tom Earle timidly, as he pulled out the bag containing it, and the two plans of the treasure cave in Ceylon. "All right, my dear fellow," Jim said, laughing, as he took the money and mixed it up in the heap on the table, "henceforward we are going to be like the apostles, and share all things in common. Cecil will explain." And, as succinctly as he could, Tarleton told Earle the events that had occurred at Hampton Lovett during the past five days.

"Your mother and sister are nursing Avice, Mrs. Gainsborough; you must consider yourself completely one of us now, dear chap. Now, first, with regard to Ceylon, we will put away £130 of this money as the sprat to catch the mackerel of the treasure. Here, catch hold! Take these ten pounds, and here is another ten for you, Jim; the odd six will last me. I do not wish to go north or to be seen in the neighbourhood of Hampton Lovett for the present"—Jim looked at him, for he knew and understood his motives—"but I am anxious to have all information. You run up, Earle, to-day, to see your mother and sister. Jim will go with you; you can put up at the 'Saracen's Head,' and the change will do you both good. Keep me well informed of all that is going on and come back in a few days. Meanwhile I will take your return tickets to Ceylon, and you can get there and back, with the treasure, I hope and believe, before the end of the year."

Two enthusiastic whoops greeted this proposal.

"We will have everything ship-shape and Bristol fashion," Tom Earle said. "Jim, draw up an agreement that we share thirds."

"No, no!" Bolitho and Tarleton said simultaneously, "half to you, a quarter each to us."

Earle gratefully yielded.

"Singleton's relations are all very wealthy, and had refused to help him in his need, so we need not bother about them," Earle said.

"Now, with regard to these diamonds," Tarleton continued; "to all intents and purposes they are mine; poor Gainsborough's free gift; and I know Mrs. Gainsborough gives them to me as freely as he did; but, till I can see my way clearer, I shall use whatever sum I can raise on them as in trust to further her interests. Poor Dick is above any worldly interests, I am afraid," he added sadly. "I wonder what they are worth," he continued, as he poured the glittering mass on the table. Jim and Earle examined them with interest.

Tarleton had not told Earle of the bundle of half-burnt letters he possessed, and in which he hoped to find the key to the mystery.

"I understand gems a bit," Earle said, smiling, as he examined the jewellery. "The two bracelets are worth about £750 each, the earrings are worth about £500, and the locket, with that large single diamond, about £1,000; in each case I am rather under the mark, that is, I mean they would now fetch these sums in the market; they are old Golconda stones of the purest water, and are really worth far more."

"At that rate the necklace would be worth about £5,000?" Bolitho said, as he handed it to him.

"Probably," Earle said, as he took it. He gave a slight start and examined it carefully; he rubbed the glittering stones thoughtfully, touched them with his tongue, poured out a tumbler of

clear water, and, dipping the necklace in it, held it up to the light, while Cecil and Jim watched him with wondering eyes. He seemed puzzled, and examined the heavy gold setting they were in, and seemed satisfied with that.

"Is it worth £5,000?" Tarleton asked.

Earle laid the necklace down with a smile.

"The cost of that necklace, including the value of the setting, which is of the purest gold and best workmanship, was just £50—not £5,000."

"What!" Cecil and Jim shouted in a breath.

"Those stones are thousands of years old, and made in nature's workshop," Earle responded, as he indicated the locket, bracelets and earrings. "The stones in this necklace are made in a human workshop, and not ten years old; for it is only within that period that the art of making artificial stones has taken such strides of improvement. The chemically made artificial precious stones of to-day are as superior to the 'paste' diamonds of our grandfathers as theirs were to bits of broken glass."

Tarleton carefully examined the necklace, and his brow grew troubled and thoughtful as he remembered the evil influence it had seemed to exert over Dick Gainsborough, and how he had hurled through the painted oriel window of Ritherdons, and he abruptly swept the suite of diamonds and the balance of the money into the

hatbox in which the bundle of half-burnt letters lay.

"Go and pack your traps," he said. "You need not take much; both your suits were new, Jim, and the pair of you look swells enough to go anywhere; we will dine at the Holborn Restaurant, and you can then catch a train from the Great Northern Railway Station at King's Cross, and reach Hampton Lovett to-night."

"There is some wicked secret here," he thought as he locked the box and its contents carefully away. "This must be a lone hand, played without any partners. I will stake my life my poor lost love, Avice, is pure and innocent. I must and will solve the mystery."

"The sooner you return and start for Ceylon the better," he said later, as he shook hands with them as the train steamed slowly out of the station, and he returned to his lonely chambers to think and plot.

Tarleton read Earle's letter, which reached him a couple of days later:—"The burning of one of the most picturesque old granges in Yorkshire has excited widespread regret, and paragraphs have appeared in the northern papers and in the London papers of to-day's date. There is a great mystery attending the whole matter. Although the ruins have been carefully examined, not a trace of human remains can be found, and the safes that contained the historic collection of Gainsborough plate have been found empty. In

fact, with the exception of a few insignificant fragments, all the valuable metal work appears to have been removed before the fire. A family of gipsies, who had camped with their van on the moor the night of the fire, assert they heard the sound of a galloping horse, but no trace has been obtained of the squire at any of the neighbouring towns." He further wrote that he had interviewed the two old servants who had been mysteriously absent the night of the fire, and that the butler, who had years before brought Dick Gainsborough home from Cambridge, appeared heart-broken at his master's disappearance. He had, he avowed, been told that his master and mistress were going to dine with Mrs. Earle, as they, on rare occasions, did, and that he had been told by his master to go with his wife and visit his son at a farm a couple of miles off, and stay the night; and that he and his wife, after closing the lower part of the house, had obeyed, as they had done the same thing on several occasions before, his master invariably closing the house himself. The butler's wife told him—Earle—that on one occasion, returning for something she had forgotten, she had seen her master talking to a tall, dark gentleman, who had come across the moor alone in a gig, and that her master had given the gentleman a heavy package, and, seeing her, had bade her, with a curse, to be gone and never to return the same night when told to visit her son, and that

she hurried off as fast as her trembling legs could carry her; but that when Earle had afterwards questioned the butler, he had sworn a round oath, and stated that his wife was a lying old baggage, always imagining rubbish; and that both were in genuine distress at the disappearance of their master, and had gone to live in a small furnished cottage at the edge of the moor. Further, Earle wrote that Mrs. Gainsborough was still in a state of semi-consciousness, and being nursed at his mother's house; and that the maidservant was on a rapid road to recovery, all she could explain being that on coming downstairs she had found the hall in darkness, and on calling to the butler in surprise to know the reason, she had received a blow or blows from someone lying in wait in the darkness, and fell insensible at once; that his mother sent kind messages, and that he was prepared to start for Ceylon as soon as he could induce Jim to return with him.

"Eh! What's up?" Tarleton thought, as he took up Jim's letter, and he chuckled as he read poor Jim's epistle. "It is lucky I sent Earle to get me all the news; it's a case with Jim." Jim had fallen head over heels "in love with Mary Earle at first sight, and had hoped his love was returned," and the whole letter was a rhapsody of praise of her, and, in a minor key, of her mother.

"My very susceptible Jim," Cecil thought, amazed. "However, it may all be for the best;"

but as he thought of his own lost Avice lying there unconscious, he fell into a train of sad thought.

He rose abruptly and sent two telegrams—one to Bolitho: "Go in and win, you have my best wishes"; the other to Earle, "Your steamer sails in three days." And he proceeded to read the half-burnt bundle of letters which he had kept until now in the vain hope that Earle might have written him something to help him to elucidate the mystery.

CHAPTER XI.

"WELL, this is comfort after the Embankment and the docks," Earle said as he lay back in lazy content while he watched the trim little Hebe of the "Saracen's Head" with deft fingers clear away their substantial Yorkshire breakfast, and finally place a bouquet of summer flowers on the table, the mingled Maréchal Niel and Gloire de Dijon roses, the mignonette and jessamine filling the cosy, old-fashioned parlour of the "Saracen's Head" with fragrant perfume.

"Jim Bolitho, you restless mortal, *will* you sit down; your proceedings are utterly incongruous to my peaceful surroundings," he continued, as he drew the tobacco jar of rare old china, for which an æsthetic connoisseur would have given a small fortune, towards him, and filled his pipe, while his eyes twinkled as he looked at Jim, who was pacing up and down the room like a caged lion in the Zoological Gardens. And indeed he had so often plunged his hands despairingly in his hair, which I am given to understand is a custom of lovers, that it stood on end, not unlike the aforesaid animal's mane.

"I tell you, Tom, your sister would be the

loveliest woman even in a Queen's drawing-room."

"Very likely, Jim, if you say so, but I don't see much chance of her ever showing up there," Earle responded placidly.

"Such eyes, such sweet features," Jim continued ecstatically, gazing upward at the long massive black beam that crossed the ceiling. "I have got your consent, old pal, and you say you can get your mother's; to-day I must know my fate."

"Spare your raptures, my dear fellow; I feel sure you are suited for each other, but my sister is only an ordinary mortal—a type certainly of all that is best on earth, a pure, sweet, lovable English girl. You have only known each other a few days, I know, but I could see it was a case of love at first sight, at least so far as you were concerned," he corrected himself, laughing; "though seriously," he said, gravely, "what you are going to do if we don't find the treasure cave I am sure I don't know."

Jim paused, and looked wistfully at him.

"Come in," Earle called out, in response to a knock at the door, and their motherly hostess entered. With an English gentleman's courtesy, Earle at once rose and placed a chair for her, which attention she acknowledged with a stately, old-world curtsey, and she placed the silver salver she held, with Cecil's two telegrams upon it, on the table.

After their pleasant morning greetings were over, and she had been duly thanked for the flowers, both eagerly asked her if there was any further intelligence about Squire Gainsborough.

"I don't know anything, gentlemen," she replied, sadly; "some thinks he is not dead. The gipsies, who are a mortal bold lot as a rule, are scart, and have broken up their camp on the moor and are off; they say they have seen at midnight two black figures, one tall and always waving his arms, wandering about the bracken; and a drover swears he saw two figures flitting in and out of Holgar's Barrow as he came along with a herd at daybreak a day or two agone; but there, he's always drunk, I take no account of what he says," she added contemptuously. "It's a main queer thing that beyond the few bits of melted jewellery Madam Gainsborough says she had left in her jewel case, there's no sign of the old plate or anything—not but what the fire was main fierce; it even burnt the outbuildings and stacks to the ground; beyond the cracked front wall there's not a stick or brick left standing of Ritherdons. Eh, eh! wae's me!"

"I am going there now," Earle answered, as he and Jim read and interchanged their telegrams, their eyes meeting with a kinldy look as they grasped their brief but pregnant purport.

"There will be a nice leg of lamb and green peas when you come back, gentlemen."

"That will be grand, Mrs. Sykes," Earle said, as they took their hats.

"I shall drop in at the cottage for five minutes," Earle said as they went out, "to see my mother and tell her of the telegrams—and you," he added.

"I knew I should have Cecil's help," Jim answered, "we have shared all we have ever had for years. I wish we could help him to unravel the Gainsborough mystery."

"Oh, well, if anyone can solve it Cecil will be that one," Earle answered confidently. "Poor Mrs. Gainsborough is utterly alone in the world; my mother tells me her heartless mother obtained a large sum from Dick Gainsborough immediately before or after her daughter's marriage, and has been on the Continent ever since; poor Avice married Dick Gainsborough because she saw he was at all events honest and true, and that he loved her dearly; indeed he appears to have been the only decent or honest man of the crew whom her mother encouraged. In fact, from what I have heard, her house was simply a swell gambling den, and she earned a precarious income by sharing in such proceeds as she was allowed by the gamblers who fleeced young men at her home. And it was because Avice refused to be a decoy duck she made the poor girl's life such a misery to her that she was glad to accept the first man she could see was at least honest in his admiration and love for her. Poor girl! her life has been very unhappy and stormy."

"Yes, and it is terrible suspense for her, not knowing if her husband is dead or alive," Jim said sympathetically, as they paused for a moment before the pretty gate that opened into the shady garden that led up to Mrs. Earle's cottage.

It was a lovely day, and the birds were making sweet music in each leafy covert; beyond the blackened ruins of Ritherdons Grange stretched the moor, covered with the purple heather and yellow heath flower, and by the roadside the milk-white thorn blossomed and clusters of rich hawthorn perfumed the air.

After a kindly greeting from Mrs. Earle, Jim Bolitho left her and her son to talk over his approaching journey to Ceylon, and for him to say all he could in favour of her future son-in-law; and with a fast-beating heart he hastened to where a very pretty English girl was seated on the stump of a tree, a sketch-book in her lap, and a green and white umbrella lying on the grass at her side. It was a lovely spot; beneath her feet was a patch of rich green turf, hemmed in on three sides by thick clusters of hawthorn bushes, while the branches of the tall trees spread a leafy covering overhead. In front the way was quite open, and commanded a view of a lonely part of the distant moor, and the solitary white cottage where the squire's old servants, the butler and cook-housekeeper, had gone to reside after the destruction of Ritherdons Grange.

Mary Earle was just budding into matured

womanhood, and a lovely type of that loveliest of all creations, a sweet English girl. Her white dress of some soft material clung round her lithe and willowy figure, and a deep red rose placed tastefully in her belt matched a tiny knot of rosebuds at her neck; her sweet features were set in masses of golden hair, coiled in Grecian plaits round her shapely classic head, and her soft, deep blue eyes, bent on the sketch-book, were almost hidden by long dark silken eyelashes. Mary Earle had one of those fair haunting faces which once seen are never forgotten, and had a peculiar fascination for Jim as he noiselessly walked over the springy sward and paused for a moment to drink in, in all its details, the sweet picture before him. As a barrister he had studied character, and felt that such a face, coupled with the dauntless spirit that had looked at him from her deep blue eyes, could only belong to an individuality of character that would make the man who should be able first to obtain the respect, and afterwards the love, of such a woman, the thrice fortunate owner of one of the choicest prizes in the world's lottery.

A slight but charming blush tinged her cheeks as she looked up, and, for a moment, as their eyes met, she caught Jim's adoring gaze fixed full on her.

"Good morning, Mr. Bolitho," she said, as she held out her hand; "I am glad to see you looking so well. How is Tom's arm? How

brave you both were, and how good of you to fight those burglars. Mamma and I were talking about it all this morning," she added enthusiastically.

Jim blushed—that is to say, he approached as nearly to doing so as a barrister can ever aspire to, for did he not know the otherwise veracious Tom had launched into the wildest seas of imagination, and had told his mother and sister most audacious taradiddles to account for his battered appearance, and the slight but interesting signs of mourning that imparted a look of piratical melancholy to Jim's orbits; and his (Jim's) hair had stood on end as he listened how he and Earle had, after a desperate fight, put to flight a gang of ferocious burglars who were about to raid a house in a remote suburb of London.

"Yes, Miss Earle," Jim stammered, as he looked admiringly at the dainty little hand lying in his great brown palm; "that wasn't it at all —er, I mean, yes, just so; anybody would have done the same, you know," he added desperately.

"The truly brave are ever modest," the guileless maiden responded, as she darted an upward flash at him from her lovely eyes; but there was such a revelation in the eyes she again met, such love and devotion shone in their clear honest depths as he looked down on her, that the blood rushed to her cheeks, her under lip quivered, and she started and trembled.

"We sail for Ceylon in two days' time, Miss

Earle," Jim said. Mary turned her gaze on the ground, but she did not speak. "Miss Earle—Mary," he said, as he gently knelt beside her, and took her unresisting hand in his own. "I have only known you but a very short while as reckoned by time, but I feel now I know you for all my future to eternity. You are the one woman the world contains for me"; and he poured forth his love in a torrent of burning words. At first she listened spell-bound and half incredulous, but gradually a happy smile spread over her features, and she permitted him to draw her close to his side and kiss her, and she heard his low, musical voice whispering soft words in her ears, and felt his kisses on her cheek and lips.

The old Eastern legend tells us that one breath, and but one only, of "love's undying flower" is vouchsafed to all poor mortals here below, and with this they must content themselves. But in some instances the lingering fragrance of this subtle plant is just as sweet, mellowing as it does the autumn years of man and woman, and following old age to its honoured grave. To the two lovers it was the spring-time of their lives; their future was brightened by hopes and adorned with all the gorgeous colouring which fancy gives; hope and love united in strewing their paths with roses.

Mary glanced shyly into his handsome face, her own looking more lovely than ever through the happy tears that glittered like drops of dew

on a forget-me-not. "I loved you, dear, from the moment I saw you," she said, simply, and she unfastened the knot of roses at her neck and gave them to him. And Jim reverently kissed the flowers and the little hand of the giver. Silence too sweet for words lasted longer than they could tell, and then Jim told her of his hopes and aspirations. The thought of being the wife of a struggling professional man did not alarm her; she only nestled more closely to his side as he pictured to her the stern battle of life that they might have to fight; and as he told her all, the ready tears glistened in her eyes as she put her arm caressingly round him, and drew down his head and sealed their betrothal with a kiss.

The shadows were lengthening when they returned to the cottage, and Mary had gone to her mother's room, to be met with loving words and bright smiles of congratulation, and, after the manner of women, they kissed and wept and fondled each other to their hearts' content.

In the average case of a healthy young Englishman, love does not destroy his appetite, and after sending up a glad affirmative to Mrs. Earle's message that she hoped to see him and her son for the rest of the evening, and as much of them as possible until their return, he started for the ruins of Ritherdons Grange, and to find Tom to take him back to the "Saracen's Head" and—item—the lamb and green peas.

CHAPTER XII.

A FEW labourers were engaged finally examining the ruins, and a little knot of country gentry were looking on; but public interest had died out, and as Jim came on the scene the chief magistrate of the district was issuing orders that the tottering front wall was to be felled and the ruins let fall inwards on the blackened heaps of masonry.

"We have been searching the cellars," Earle said to Jim as he came up. So far from anything being there to elucidate matters, the mystery is only deepened. All the casks of wine and ale stored there have been staved in by blows of a heavy hatchet; we found it sticking in the last barrel; and of the dozens of old wine and spirits there is not one that has escaped being wantonly destroyed. The whole place is an utter desolate wreck," and, as he spoke, the front wall of Ritherdons Grange fell inward with a dull roar, and another ancient English house was amongst the things of the past, and as utterly blotted out as if it had never been.

The little conclave of spectators broke up, and

Bolitho and Earle thoughtfully walked out past the iron gates, the stately solitary remnants of the lost house of Gainsborough.

"We ought to try and get more information," Earle said. "Let us go and see what Holgar's Barrow is like."

Jim nodded assent, and they passed along the road Cecil Tarleton had traversed a short while before.

"What changes have taken place in these few days," Earle said, "not the least of them to you," he continued. "I had only to look at your radiant face to see your suit had prospered; well, my blessed prospective brother-in-law, you have my best wishes for you both," and he warmly grasped Jim's hand, who returned the kindly pressure.

"That is Holgar's Barrow," Tom said as they emerged from the wood and looked at it, as the pile of stones stood out white in the sunshine, and a quarter of an hour's walk across the moor brought them to it. It was a Cyclopean pile of prehistoric masonry. A huge stone some fifteen feet long, supported by two massive lintels, formed the doorway, while surrounding it were large blocks of stone, twisting in and out in seemingly shapeless confusion, but, in reality, built in imitation of the winding coils of a snake. Within the surrounding stones was an open roofless chamber with a sacrificial altar, carved deep with runnels and rivulets, from which the

sacrificial blood in ages past had flowed into the stone troughs below.

For in the dim past many a mystic rite had been performed here, and the arch-priests of the Druids in the times of war and pestilence had offered up hecatombs of human sacrifices to the gods of Osiris and Baal. Here, too, gloomy, mystic Saturn, father of all the gods, and Sun and Moon had been worshipped, as seasons waxed and waned, with offerings of milk-white heifers and the sacred mistletoe, offspring of the lightning, cut with golden sickle from the limbs of the mighty oaks that grew in the forests round where Ritherdons had been, ages before the embattled piles of Norman Ritherdons had risen amid the clamour of busy Saxon slaves.

Bolitho and Earle walked round the hoary moss-covered stones of the mighty monument of the religions of the past, where within its walls later Saxon had worshipped grim Odin, and Thor of the hammer, and fair goddess Freya, bounteous dispenser of the fruits of the earth. They peered into every nook and cranny, but there was no place where a man could possibly be concealed. A shout from Bolitho made Earle hasten to him.

"What have you got?" he said, as he saw a piece of something dully white in his hand.

"A part of an evening dress tie," he replied, as he held it out to him. "And, see, here's a diamond evening dress stud; it was lying close by."

Sorely puzzled, they put them carefully away

to be handed to Cecil Tarleton, and renewed their search, but nothing further rewarded their efforts, and they returned to the "Saracen's Head," and from there to Mrs. Earle's cottage, where they spent a halcyon evening, Mary Earle's and Bolitho's joy unchequered by a single cloud, save their pitying sorrow for Avice Gainsborough, who, though unable to appear, was slowly recovering under the loving nursing of Mrs. Earle and her daughter, and who sent kindly messages of congratulation to them all. The next day, accompanied by Mary Earle, Jim and Tom made an exhaustive search round the ruins of Ritherdons, and again at Holgar's Barrow, but they could find nothing further that could give them the slightest clue regarding the fate of the missing squire. And after one of those too rare days of perfect happiness, they bade farewell to the ladies of Mrs. Earle's cottage, including wan Avice, who, for the first time, was able to appear. And after an affectionate good-bye to Mrs. Sykes at the "Saracen's Head," they returned to London, *en route* for Ceylon.

The pleasant rooms in Hare Court, Middle Temple, again glowed with welcome, and Cecil Tarleton listened with absorbed interest as they told him of the absence of all traces of the Gainsborough plate and valuables, and the meaningless destruction of the contents of the cellars. And they gave him the torn dress tie and diamond stud, all the relics that were left, if, indeed, they

belonged to him, of the lost head of the House of Gainsborough.

Tarleton's brow grew dark as he looked at them and placed them carefully in the box that contained the real and imitation diamonds and half-burnt letters.

"I hope to master the mystery before your return, my dear fellows," he said. "At present I can tell you nothing; what little I can make out must remain a secret at present, for all my surmises are but conjectures. I am beating the empty air. And now, with regard to Ceylon, here are your return tickets, and here is a money order on the revived Oriental Bank for your expenses when you land in Ceylon. Mind and come back as quickly as you can."

In these days of rapid transit, most articles can be obtained as easily in Ceylon and India as in England, and a couple of hours' shopping next morning provided Earle and Bolitho with a couple of blue serge and white drill suits, a brace of revolvers, heavy boots and leech gaiters, a couple of pith helmets, and the necessary under garments, all of which were stored in a light tin box and a sturdy "overland" portmanteau, a valued old treasure of Jim's that had been redeemed. And as Earle was an old traveller and knew exactly what they wanted, both on the voyage and when in the island, they took all their old clothes to be worn on board, and then thrown away or given to the sailors.

The strike was drawing to its close, and the idle shipping clustered thick in the docks of the port of London as Tarleton saw the train with Earle and Bolitho slowly steam out of the station, bound for Southampton Water, from whence their steamer was to start.

And a few hours afterwards, amid the screaming of its steam whistle and booming of its fog horn, the Peninsular and Oriental steamer once more sailed from its lately abandoned port of Southampton, bound for the East.

"To their speedy voyage and prosperous return," Cecil Tarleton said to himself as he drained his glass at the refreshment buffet; "and now to tackle the mystery of Ritherdons," he thought, as he walked slowly back to his lonely chambers from Waterloo Station. On reaching his chambers he "sported his oak" by closing the massive outer door, and bringing the box in, he spread out the letters before him.

CHAPTER XIII.

"ALL men and women are immortal till their work is done," he mused as he looked at them. "I saved my poor lost love Avice's life; I must now save her fair fame, and possibly her honour and her fortune."

He methodically arranged the letters before him; they were all more or less torn and burnt, and were evidently but scraps and fragments of a much larger correspondence. "I cannot make the handwriting out," he muttered, as he again bent to his task; "is it a man's or a woman's? From the peculiar formation of some letters (the same right through, I have already noticed) they are all from the same person; but the writing is so varied and uneven. By heaven! I have it!" he exclaimed, as he started; "they are all written in a disguised hand. The double-distilled devil, be it male or female, who penned them was a coward as well. In spite of all the laws that were ever framed, had I the writer here the incarnate cold-blooded fiend should never leave the place alive;" and his veins stood out in knotted cords on his clenched fists and forehead as he moaned in helpless pity and wrath.

The paroxysm of anger passed away, and he was once more the keen, cool-headed barrister, examining and analysing the evidence before him.

The first letter of the series, from internal evidence, was written just after Dick Gainsborough's marriage to Avice. The unknown and anonymous writer sneeringly congratulated Dick Gainsborough on having married a decoy duck from a gambling den. The writer evidently knew Dick Gainsborough's character thoroughly, and with unholy skill played on the conflicting passions of his morbidly jealous and suspicious nature.

In other letters the writer recalled scenes to Gainsborough's mind when he had repeatedly lost heavily at cards at Mrs. Banastre's house, scenes at which the writer had evidently been present, and sneeringly commented on every action of poor Avice's; even her evident confusion and distress at the conduct of the crew who had surrounded Dick was basely commented on as a fear on her part that Dick might not propose, and that she would be robbed of her share of the spoils. Every letter breathed a spirit of cold-blooded malignity, devilish spite, and unnatural hatred towards Avice; and as Tarleton read on, he could see how poor Dick had gradually been enmeshed in the snares set for him with such calculating cunning. It was evident to Cecil that the writer's knowledge of Dick Gainsborough had commenced long after

he had left the lunatic asylum, his reason fully restored, and that the writer was unacquainted with his earlier days; as the writer once or twice alluded to his having been at Oxford instead of Cambridge, where, the writer observed, he ought to have learned more sense than to be captivated by the wiles of an abandoned woman. Then came epistles, evidently in response to passionate letters from poor Dick, in which the writer swayed and influenced him more and more with an affectation of candour and good-will towards him personally, and stating that, while unable to see him personally, the writer was watching, with an anxious eye, over his interests; but that should he breathe a word to his wife, the writer would know of it, and leave Dick to his infatuated folly. Other letters mentioned that the writer was aware that Dick and Avice had come to London, and as Cecil read them he started, and for a second began to doubt Avice.

The first letter told Dick to take a witness with him, and watch at a certain hour at a street in Chelsea which was notorous for its evil reputation. He would, so the letter said, see his wife enter a house in the street; afterwards he was to make inquiries as to the character of the house. The next letter was written some days afterwards, and Cecil clenched his teeth as he saw how the writer adopted the tone of one who had proved his case to the hilt. The letter referred to what

Dick had seen with his own eyes, while he mentioned the result of the inquiries he had made, and the scene he had witnessed, as if there could no longer be any doubt left as to his wife's guilt.

As he read this last letter Cecil could make out the note of devilish triumph in the writer, who seemed to be exulting as a fiend would over a fallen soul.

His doubts as to Avice's innocence had only been momentary, and if it had remained, it would have been dispelled by the tone of the letter.

The man who wrote was cunning enough to contrive any fiendish plot. After those two letters the tone of the correspondence altered. No more *proof* was needed, the writer said, but Gainsborough would find that his wife was so shameless that she would wear in his presence a priceless diamond necklace fit for a queen, a secret present to her, and a specimen of the kind of presents she received from one of her paramours since her marriage. "Question her where she got it, she will give you no explanation or reply, or trump up some wildly improbable tale. In these days," the writer went on, "a penniless wife like Avice does not have presents of thousands of pounds' worth of jewellery from admirers unknown to her husband without some equivalent."

Then in other letters allusions were made to Avice's temporary absence from her husband. In each case the writer, or spies in the writer's pay,

had carefully noted her outgoings and incomings, and mentioned the low neighbourhood she had visited, and the dissipated young man who had resided there, and whom she had known intimately before her marriage.

And as letter after letter went on, and the cunningly-distilled poison of jealousy and mistrust sank deeper into poor Dick's gradually darkening brain, and as the writer could see the hold the letters and accusations were gaining over Dick's mind, the writer became more bold, and suggestions and hints were thrown out—at first dark and obscure, then more boldly—that Dick Gainsborough should take a terrible revenge on his faithless wife, by thrusting her forth penniless into the world to starve. The writer evidently knew there had been no marriage settlements; in fact, the marriage had been hurried on shortly after Dick had lost more heavily than usual at Mrs. Banastre's house, which had been closed next day (Tarleton learned afterwards), as she and her accomplices had got intimation that a police raid was imminent. The writer further advised, in oft-reiterated suggestions, that Dick should make her non-explanation of her conduct, and how and where she had obtained the diamond necklace, reasons for deserting her; and that before doing so he should remove all his title deeds, bonds, stocks, shares, plate, ancestral pictures, and valuables to some secret stronghold, and then, having thrust her forth, to sell the

furniture at Ritherdons and travel abroad. Dick Gainsborough's brain, never very strong, had rapidly grown weaker and finally given way under these repeated and insidious attacks. And while poor Avice had pined and mourned over her husband's growing gloomy taciturnity and estrangement, with the unnatural cunning of a madman he was carrying out the instructions of her deadly and secret enemy. It was evident that Gainsborough had never breathed a word of his suspicions or of the letters to his wife, and his brain must have been gradually giving way from the latter half of this last year of their marriage. The solitude of Ritherdons, the absence of the boon companions of before his marriage, and the distractions of gambling—his chief hobby—and the change from the thousand and one attractions of London to the monotonous country life, had made Dick Gainsborough ever brood more within himself and eat his heart out, until the brain barriers had suddenly broken down and he had become a homicidal maniac. His final acts, after ridding himself of all his fortune, being the destruction of the costly wines stored in the cellars of Ritherdons, the pride of generations of hospitable squires of the house of Gainsborough; and finally, after Avice had been miraculously saved by Cecil Tarleton, the destruction of his ancestral hall by fire.

"Poor Dick! he has been indeed more sinned

against than sinning," Cecil thought in sorrowful anger, as he looked at the devilish records of a ruined, kindly life strewn on the table before him. "Iago was a saint to Othello compared to this unknown fiend," he thought.

"Poor Avice is as pure as snow and as innocent as an angel, I feel as sure as there is a Heaven," he said aloud; "even now her life may be in imminent danger. This diamond stud is the one Dick wore the night I had that duel at cards with him. I should know that brilliant in its antique setting among a thousand. I took in every detail of that terrible scene with such minute distinctness I could not be mistaken; there is no trace of him in the ruins of Ritherdons. I look upon the tie as merely constructive evidence. I understand now the destruction of the wines, and his burning Ritherdons Grange, and now the first thing to be done is to trace the original holder of the imitation diamond necklace," and he carefully placed it in his breast pocket.

"Tom Earle was exactly right; Osborne and Gall have advanced £350 on one of the bracelets. I need the sinews of war for Avice's sake." And, with his head resting on his hand, he long remained sunk in anxious thought.

The long, low booming of the Middle Temple dinner horn, as, in accordance with the custom of centuries, the stalwart porter blew it lustily to summon the barristers and students of the

Inn to their mess dinner, roused him from his reverie.

"How lonely it is, and how cold I feel!" he said with a shudder, as he replaced the letters in the box with the real jewellery, the balance of the money he had obtained from Osborne and Gall on the bracelet, and the faded, torn white tie and diamond stud. "I will hire a safe in the Chancery Lane Safe Deposit Company's offices to-morrow," he mused, "and place all these things there. I don't care to open a banking account for so small a sum, and I can take what I want without trouble. The necklace I will never part with until I have learnt the mystery connected with it." Again the booming sound of the Middle Temple dinner horn fell on his ear. He paused irresolute for a moment.

"Yes, I will; I cannot bear to dine alone to-night, with only my gloomy thoughts as my companions. I will dine at our Inner Temple mess." And, closing the door of his chambers with a slam, he crossed Hare Court to the dining hall of his Inn.

The head porter of the Inner Temple was standing ready in the robing room, and placed a barrister's gown over Tarleton's shoulders, and he entered the brilliantly-lighted dining hall. It chanced to be "grand night" of the term, the special night when those grave and reverend seigneurs, the Benchers of the Honourable Society of the Inner Temple, invite such exalted personages or eminent men in literature, science,

or art, whom it delighteth their souls to honour, to banquet with them. Royalty was the guest that night, and as the stately procession of Benchers swept in with their honoured guests and took their seats on the lofty dais at the end of the hall, the long rows of students, clad in gowns of a "subfusc hue," stood respectfully up; whilst the barristers, at their cosy tables in one part of the room, rose in a body and gravely bowed to the guests of the evening and their Benchers, and then to each other.

"I have been so preoccupied I forgot it was 'grand night,'" Tarleton thought, as the black velvet-clad "vintners" passed round the barristers' tables, pouring out generous bumpers of the special *cuvée* of Inn champagne—a gift, on grand nights, by the Benchers to the barristers and students, in addition to the rare old port and sherry which were the usual accompaniments of the mess dinners of barrister and student alike.

It was a magnificent scene, the banqueting hall of the Inner Temple that night. The hall itself, as large as a lofty church, was gorgeous with the lofty stained-glass windows which stretched from floor to roof, covered with the armorial bearings of the knights of the Temple, its earliest founders, in all the brilliancy of the heraldic colourings which composed their coats of arms. The bronze statues of Crusaders at the end of the hall looked peacefully down—in con-

trast to their martial lives—on the new generations who ever passed before them, pledged (as *they* were in ancient times) to aid and protect the injured and oppressed.

The tables shone with the snowy napery and glittered with the ancient silver plate of the Inn, and the busy hum of conversation sounded through the hall after the chaplain had pronounced the solemn benediction.

"How often poor Jim and I have longed to be able to pay the modest dining fee of three shillings and sixpence and join our friends at mess—how often we have longed for even a crust of bread and cheese in our recent days of hardship," Cecil thought as he looked round. "I must get all the strength I can and my brain clear for my task, which will take all my time, energies, and intellect from to-morrow. I have done with duty to-day. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof. I shall be able to say, with Goldsmith, 'Fate cannot harm me to-day, I have dined.'"

In accordance with the ancient custom of the Inn—the champagne being now creaming and frothing in the old-fashioned glasses—Tarleton raised his glass and bowed to the captain of his mess and the two other barristers who sat at the table with him. A barrister's mess consists of four gentlemen, the one who sits, as a matter of accident and not necessarily the oldest, at the top right-hand corner being, *ipso facto*, the

"captain of the mess" for the evening; his chief duty being to gather the suffrages of his companions as to whether two bottles of claret should be substituted for one bottle of their mess allowance of a bottle each of port and sherry.

As Cecil looked at his companions he found two were men he knew slightly, and that the third was an old fellow-undergraduate at Cambridge.

"The very man I should like to ask about the necklace," he thought; for he knew Dixie, the man opposite him, was a celebrated criminal barrister, and acquainted with the leading detectives of the day.

The dinner passed, as most mess dinners do, in pleasant chat, to the rigorous exclusion of "shop," and after the loyal toast of "Her Majesty the Queen" had been enthusiastically drunk, in response to the resounding thump of the prayer book on the daïs, held by the head "panier" or "bread dispenser" (to literally translate his ancient title), the company rose and dispersed, the Benchers with their guests retiring to the private rooms of the Inn.

"Could you spare time to have a cigar in my rooms?" Cecil Tarleton said to Dixie, the criminal barrister.

"Yes, with pleasure," was the answer; "but I must leave in half an hour, I have legal work to attend to."

"Thanks," Cecil replied; "to tell you the

exact state of affairs, knowing you are connected with the Old Bailey, I wanted to ask your opinion as a brother barrister."

"I shall be happy to aid you if I can," was the guarded answer, and they entered Cecil's chambers, and while his guest smoked a Havannah, Cecil showed him the imitation diamond necklace.

For awhile the barrister smoked in silence while he carefully examined it. "You must give me your word of honour that you will make no bad use of such information as I can give you." Cecil eagerly gave the required guarantee.

"It is lucky you asked me; you would have gone on a wild-goose chase had you endeavoured to ascertain through ordinary channels. See, here is a tiny private mark," and he took out of his pocket a file. "These stones are what are called 'doublets'—very thin slices of real diamonds are sawn off good stones at Antwerp and Rotterdam, the great centres of the diamond-cutting industry, and attached outside to the purest crystals procurable, but which I could notch with this file; but as these are made most experts would be deceived, even with an exhaustive examination. Did you see that a sapphire bracelet was advertised as having been found at the Queen's last Drawing Room?"

Cecil nodded assent.

"I saw that bracelet at Scotland Yard. It

would never be claimed; the lady, whoever she was, who lost it will not venture to reveal her secret. It looks worth a large fortune; it is in reality worth about twenty pounds. It consists of, to the eye, magnificent sapphires. In reality, the stones are from one fine sapphire, cut into thin slices and fastened over pieces of deeply-blue, delicate glass. So with white crystals on this necklace," and he threw it on the table.

"Thanks very much," Tarleton said, as the Old Bailey barrister rose to go. "Will you give me the name of the firm who supplies them?"

"Certainly, after your word of honour you require the knowledge to forward the ends of justice," and he at once gave Cecil the required information. "Good-night; glad to have obliged you," and he strolled out.

An hour later Cecil sent in his card to a fashionable jeweller in the West End. He was at once asked into an inner parlour, and a partner, with some trepidation, examined the necklace.

"We will examine our books, sir, and let you know. Would you first be good enough to satisfy us you are Mr. Tarleton, the barrister?"

"Certainly," Cecil said, and produced letters and other documentary evidence. The partner expressed himself as quite satisfied. "Not that we have anything to conceal, sir," he hastened to explain, "but that we do not give our customers' names as a rule. We have seen an account of

the destruction of Ritherdons Grange in the newspapers, and that Squire Gainsborough is missing, and we presume you are acting on behalf of the family?"

Tarleton bowed gravely.

"We find that a commissionaire called here with a deposit and a verbal request that several imitation diamond necklaces should be sent by him for approval. This necklace, the most expensive one, was selected; the remainder sent back, and we refunded the deposit, less its cost, and sent a receipted bill per bearer, and that is all the share our firm had in the matter."

"Can you tell me nothing more?" Cecil said, sorely disappointed.

"Only this," the jeweller replied gravely, "that of course we jewellers have a secret understanding with each other, and a trusty *employé* followed the commissionaire until he reached Messrs. Brown and Co., and we were perfectly satisfied when we learnt from them that the necklace, which is of the best modern workmanship, was to be included without alteration in the parcel of family jewels to be sent north to Squire Gainsborough, of Ritherdons Grange, in the course of the following few days, and which they had had reset."

Tarleton thanked the jeweller for his trouble, and Messrs. Brown corroborated his statement in every particular, and could give him no further information.

"If it costs me my life I will solve the mystery and clear Avice," he vowed, "and if ever I find her foul traducer, both she and poor deceived maddened Dick Gainsborough shall be avenged."

A postcard from the Peninsular and Oriental Steamship Company lay in his letter-box when he unlocked the doors of his chambers in Hare Court that night.

"Our steamer, the *Arcot*, has passed the Isle of Wight; the pilot has left her; all well."

CHAPTER XIV.

"A LETTER, Mr. Tarleton, sir," Mrs. Jukes said next morning, as she looked into his room in the intervals of cleaning up the chambers and getting breakfast.

Cecil took it carelessly, but his face brightened, and he eagerly tore it open when he once again saw the handwriting of Avice Gainsborough after the lapse of years.

"I have recovered, my old and true friend," it ran, "in body, but I am sorely troubled in mind and spirit. Come and advise and guide me; I am helpless and alone. I do not know what to do; act for me in every way as you think best. All is mystery and darkness to me. I know your kindly heart too well; you will not refuse to come." A few sad words, that was all, but they found their way to the inmost recesses of Cecil's heart.

"My poor lost love, I will be your own true knight; may Heaven deal with me as I shall with you. Mrs. Jukes," he called, "go to Chancery-lane, to any one of the law stationers there, and

buy a strong deed-box; here is the money—you know the kind."

"Yes, sir;" and while she was gone he hastily rose and dressed.

"You need not attend here until I send for you," he said, on her return; "I am going out of town for a few days." And after she had swathed the furniture in those mummy-like folds of linen coverings dear to the hearts of Temple laundresses, he paid her wages and closed the door.

After packing a portmanteau he took out the contents of the hat-box, and methodically placed them before him. Again the Gainsborough diamonds, with the exception of one bracelet, shone on the table, but its absence was represented by a little pile of gold and a roll of crisp Bank of England notes.

"I have plenty in hand," he calculated, as he rapidly ran over the money, and he separated £50 for current expenses from the heap, and placed the balance in the deed-box. He then turned to the jewellery, and, separating the imitation diamond necklace, and the diamond stud and torn white tie found at Holgar's Barrow by Earle and Bolitho, he placed them in a small wash-leather bag, and then in his breast pocket; and after carefully folding up the remainder of the jewels in tissue paper, he placed them and the voucher for the bracelet, with the money, in the deed-box, and locked it, and left his chambers.

Handing his portmanteau to one of the newsboys who were clustered outside the Inn portals, he bade him accompany him to the offices of the Chancery Lane Safe Deposit Company, at 61 and 62, Chancery Lane.

The two stalwart attendants, in their uniforms of brown and red, good conduct soldiers, who had retired on pension after serving their Queen and country in all parts of the world, saluted Tarleton as he stood in front of the massive steel railing that spanned the entrance of 61, Chancery Lane, and asked for the manager ; and one of them took the portmanteau from the boy and placed it in custody of one of the guards, while Tarleton, deed-box in hand, entered the massive steel building and descended the iron steps to see the secretary of the institution.

Strong rooms to right of him,
Strong rooms to left of him,
Strong rooms beneath him,
Steel doors in front of him.

" Would you like to see the building?" the courteous sercetary said, as he handed Tarleton the receipt for two guineas, the first year's rent of the safe he had rented, a receptacle some twenty inches long and about eight broad.

" I should, very much," Cecil responded.

" We will first place your deed-box in your safe, and then go the round of the building.

" Liberate," he said to the uniformed attendant, standing at attention near the strong room

corridor. The servitor obeyed, and unlocked the massive door.

"You will see," the secretary said, turning to Tarleton, "the door is more than a foot thick; it weighs two tons, and is made on the inside of chilled steel, on the outside of several inches of hammered iron; the inner door is compound, the lower part of steel, and these upper bars of boiler iron. Now to place your deed-box in the safe. Liberate," he again commanded the waiting official, who inserted a key in the steel front of the deed-box Cecil had just rented. "You have another key," the secretary continued: "it is the only key of its kind in the world. All these other strong boxes," he added, pointing down the corridor—so long that its end was almost lost to view, though the place was brilliantly lighted up with electric lights—"have each a key of a separate pattern." The attendant turned his key in the keyhole, which was above two others in the safe. "Until the attendant had done that and moved the mechanism of the lock you could not have turned your key in the lock at all," the secretary explained. "I now insert my key, the secretary's key, in the third keyhole and unlock, but until we have all three turned the keys the safe would not open. There, Mr. Tarleton, is your safe," he said, as Cecil inserted the owner's key and turned it, and the steel and iron door of the safe swung open.

Tarleton thanked him and placed the deed-box

in the safe and then locked it, the reverse order of the keys having to be used, and, in virtue of his being the owner of the safe, he being the first to lock it.

"The object of the Chancery Lane Safe Deposit is to provide for the use of private individuals, as well as for societies, bankers, merchants, solicitors, and others an absolutely secure place for keeping wills, deeds, bonds, stocks, bills, policies, leases, and every important document; also for storing plate chests, jewels, bullion, precious stones, and all kinds of valuables, for short or long periods. We have over 5,000 safes and strong rooms, varying in size to suit every requirement; absolutely fire-proof and burglar-proof. Our safes are immovably fixed in fire-proof and burglar-proof strongholds, and are entirely isolated. Patrols in corridors surround them, and there are open spaces above and below them. Watchmen are continually marching round both night and day—at night armed with loaded rifle and bayonet—and it is utterly impossible for anyone to approach unobserved. Everything that modern science or skill could devise has been employed to make the deposit absolutely secure.

"The strong room itself, which we have just left, is formed, like the rest, of concrete, of immense thickness, all lined with heavy boiler plate, with a combination of steel. Each door is fitted with a mechanical clockwork arrangement in the lock which admits of it being opened only at the

particular time for which the clockwork is set.

"Trustees and others can have safes or strong rooms provided with locks requiring two or more distinct keys, so as to prevent trust or other property being removed by one trustee without the knowledge of the other. Here is a tell-tale clock. At every quarter of an hour through the night, when the institution is closed, the armed patrols have to touch these knobs, which shows they were in attendance on duty.

"We call this the Parnell room," he continued, as he showed Tarleton one large strong room. "We had all the papers and documents of the Parnell Inquiry Commission stored here; and here," he added, as he pointed down the corridor, "are strong rooms in which are stored some of the most important property of the English aristocracy. Another advantage is that, by frequent communications, we keep ourselves in touch with our clients—not like banks, of which Messrs. Coutts are an example, who have had charge of quantities of most valuable property, deposited by aristocratic *emigrés* in the French Revolution at the beginning of this century and end of the last, and who in many cases died on the scaffold and have never returned to reclaim their property.

"Here are our writing, reading, telephone and writing rooms, free of charge to our clients, and a special room for ladies," the secretary concluded as

they emerged from the strong rooms below to the upper part of the institution. "We shall know you, Mr. Tarleton," the secretary said, smiling, as they shook hands at parting, "but where identification is necessary, as for instance in cases of shipwreck, we require most satisfactory proofs of identification, and in the case of any legal expenses arising in connection therewith, we defray them. Good-bye."

Cecil placed the key, with its intricate tracery of wards, stamped with skilled artificer's cunning out of the solid steel, in the wash-leather bag with the necklace and stud, and replaced it in a secret pocket of his coat.

CHAPTER XV.

"An extra shilling if you catch the Great Northern express," he said to the driver of the hansom cab one of the doorkeepers on guard at the entrance had hailed for him.

"Do it easy, sir; this old mare of mine would run anybody out of their mind for an extra bob."

As if the mare understood and appreciated the dubious compliment, they bowled cheerily along the Gray's Inn Road, and, as the driver remarked as he pocketed the fare, "caught the train with a goodish bit in hand," and a few hours later Cecil was again being welcomed by Mrs. Sykes of the "Saracen's Head."

He was expected at Upcott's cottage, and Mrs. Earle came to the gate to greet him warmly. "Avice is still weak and ill, but fast recovering; you must not unduly excite her."

"I will be careful," Cecil answered, and Mrs. Earle pointed down the garden to where Mary Earle was sitting on the tree stump where Jim had proposed to her, now engaged in her loving task of soothing Avice, who lay back in an arm-chair near her.

As Cecil approached both girls stood up, and Cecil grasped their hands with his. One yearning look at Avice and their wistful eyes met; one look of her eyes, and he saw the mute appeal to his manhood and loyal help. And he crushed down the love that had been hers for years deep in his heart, so that neither by word nor look would he appear unfaithful to the trust circumstances had forced on him. He stood there a loyal English gentleman to his heart's core, true to his missing friend, true to his friend's wife.

"I can congratulate you, dear Miss Earle, with all my heart," he said. "Jim and I have weathered many a storm together, and I know—none better—his good heart. I congratulate him, and may many years of happiness to come be yours."

Mary Earle looked at him with her clear blue eyes as she softly thanked him, and then at Avice, and as she saw the two noble faces, refined and purified by the chastening suffering of the trial they were going through, as gold is purified by the furnace, the heavenly radiance of a great pity and admiration swept over her mobile face, and with sweet, womanly tenderness she bent over Avice and kissed her. Avice knew what that pure, sisterly kiss meant, and so did Cecil; and she went away, knowing she left two hearts upheld by the honour that is more than love or life itself.

For a moment neither Avice nor Cecil spoke.

"You must not stand, Avice; I have promised Mrs. Earle to take great care of you," Cecil said. Avice submitted like a little child, and he arranged the wrappers carefully round her as she lay back in her chair. As he did so their hands met, and Avice slowly took his and pressed it, and Cecil raised hers to his lips.

No knight of King Arthur's Round Table ever kissed the hand of lady for whom he was going forth to battle with more noble thought than Cecil when he gave that brotherly kiss. And a feeling of restful security and content stole over Avice as she knew that keen brain, strong arm, and loving heart would do all that could be done to aid her.

"Now, Avice, you must look on me as the sage barrister come to advise and help you," Cecil said; "if it will not fatigue you too much, tell me all that preceded that day at Ritherdons. I shall know better then what to do." He had decided not to tell her of the half-burnt letters if he found she was ignorant of them, as the knowledge of their existence at present could do no good, and only distress her.

With an involuntary shudder, as she trembled and looked affrightedly round, she tried to begin. Cecil, to give her time, told her of Jim and Tom's journey to Ceylon in search of the buried treasure. Gradually the colour came back to her cheeks as she listened, and felt she could not respond with ingratitude to his thoughtful kindness, and she

nerved herself to her task. "Poor Dick," she said, "was always kind to the last. I used to see him looking wistfully at me for hours sometimes, and I tried to make him happy and be a good wife to him. Sometimes for weeks I would think I still held his love, and then again he would be cold and gloomy and *distrait*. When we went to London after we had been married some time, he took the Gainsborough diamonds with us, to be re-set in modern setting, he said; some I had seen, others not, some were at his bankers', and I never cared about the jewels. We never went into society, save on rare occasions, to state dinners at some of our distant country neighbours. We always wore evening dress for dinner; he told me even when his father and he dined alone his father always put on his diamond buckled shoes and stately old dinner dress. One day he told me that he wished me to open the jewel case that had arrived from the jeweller's and put on all the diamonds. I remember that he impressed upon me that he wanted *all* of them on me, that, he said, he might judge of the effect. He had been more than usually cold and reserved for some time before, and had about a fortnight before made a trip to London for a couple of days and had taken with him a large box. I now think the old silver plate must have been in it; but," she continued wearily, "all is mystery and darkness to me. I gladly hoped his wish to see me in the diamonds was a proof of his returning

affection, and I opened the cases and put on all I could find in the jewel-box. In my anxiety to please him my maid and I spent some time over my toilette, and I sent her downstairs to say I was coming directly, and after I had put on all the jewels, after a few trials to get the best effects, I followed her. To my surprise the hall was in darkness, and I thought I heard a muffled moan; so, with a vague sense of terror, dreading I knew not what, I threw open the door of the room, whence I could see a gleam of light issuing from under the door, and ran in. Poor Dick was standing behind the door, and I ran to the end of the room by the table where you saw me before I noticed he was in the room. As soon as I looked at him I shrieked, for that one glance told me all: my husband, whom I truly loved—for he had been kind and good to me—was a raving maniac. Those eyes that had often looked wistfully and doubtfully at me, but never unkindly, more with the pained expression of some dumb animal craving sympathy and trust, even when most unkindly looking, now blazed with the fires of madness. I pressed my hands before my face to hide the horrible sight from my eyes, while I prayed heaven that it was a phantasm of my brain; but I heard his voice in tones I had never heard before, for he had ever been patient, and an unkind word had never passed his lips to me.

"'Who gave you that necklace?' he said, and

oh! that voice, that look, I can never forget it," and she clutched Cecil's hand; he took hers protectingly in his own, and she went on—

"I could not answer; I had never seen the necklace until that day. Some of the other jewels I had seen and admired once or twice in their antique setting; but the necklace came with the rest, and, of course, I thought it was part of the set. 'Take them off and throw them down,' he commanded. With nervous haste I did so, and tore my ear as I took the earrings out. The sight of the blood seemed to goad him to frenzy. 'Do you think that little drop of blood will be enough?' he said. 'Again, where did you get that necklace?' Thinking it must be part of the Gainsborough diamonds, and that he had forgotten, I tremblingly said that it was part of the heirlooms of the family. He did not reply, but turned to the safe from which he took the money for you, and took out a large bundle of letters. They were all docketed, I could see, and without hesitation he turned to one which he read carefully, and then again he fixed his burning eyes on me; and then for a moment I must have fainted, for when I hurriedly rose from the chair into which I had fallen, I saw he had placed the gold-hilted sacrificial dagger on the table. I knew the dagger; it was one of the oldest relics of the house of Gainsborough. It had descended from father to son from an ancestor—a Druid arch-priest—two thousand years

ago. 'You lie, Avice,' he said, slowly and calmly, and his stony calmness was even more terrible than his raving madness of a short while before; and, stooping slowly forward, he took up the necklace. Everything was as still as the grave —a hush had come over nature. The thunderstorm had been raging without, but in the deadlier storm within it crashed unheeded. With all the force of his strong arm he hurled it through the painted coat of arms on the oriel window. 'You will never see another sun; you die to-night—you die now! Your shameful head will be in one place, and your vile body in another, and the kites and crows of Ritherdons Moor shall pick your bones.' As he spoke the door opened, and you entered"; and Avice, her strength gone as she finished relating her dread experience, gave a gasping sob and fainted. Cecil's shout of alarm brought Mrs. Earle and Mary to the scene, and Avice was carried in Tarleton's strong arms to the house.

"You must not see her again to-day," Mrs. Earle said, and Cecil walked slowly and thoughtfully back to the "Saracen's Head."

"It was not without a reason that I should have arrived in time to save Avice," he thought hopefully. "I look on it as being a good omen—'tis not in mortals to command success,' but I'll do more—deserve it," he thought, quoting Addison's "Cato." "She may be wanting money," he reflected.

"Can you change a £20 note for me?" he asked Mrs. Sykes as he entered the parlour of the 'Saracen's Head.'

"I should have been proud to have done so, sir," was her reply, "but the lost squire's old servant has just been here, and I changed a ten-pound note for him, and it has taken all I have."

"Oh, well," Cecil said, "it does not matter." But her words set him thinking. "I should like to have a talk with him," he said, turning to Mrs. Sykes; "can you tell me where he is?"

"Surely, sir, he and his wife are living at the cottage on the moor that you can see from the lawn at Upcott's cottage."

Cecil remembered noticing it as it stood out white in the sun, with its little garden, a vivid patch of white and green against the purple and gold background of the heather and bracken.

"I have nothing to do the rest of the day now; I will go and see him."

The old servant saw him crossing the moor to the cottage, and respectfully came to meet him. Although his hair was white with the snows of sixty winters, he was as upright and active, and in size and figure the same, as his lost master, Squire Gainsborough—a splendid type of a sturdy Yorkshire tyke, of that class of men who, with the lithe and sinewy men from the neighbouring fens of Lincoln, had supplied the British armies with those incomparable bowmen who had overwhelmed the French at Crecy, Poictiers, and

Agincourt, and, in later generations, formed that thin red line of infantry that has carried the British ensigns to victory from Indus to Cathay.

He saluted Tarleton in respectful silence while he waited to hear what he wished to say. Cecil remembered him at once. He had been the faithful retainer who had taken Dick Gainsborough north shortly after the card-party at Cambridge, and he had been the faithful servitor of the family ever since.

They looked keenly at each other for a moment. "I came to ask—you can give me no information about your missing master?"

"None, sir," was the quiet, sad reply.

Cecil felt disappointed. "You know I was his great friend at Cambridge?"

"Yes, sir, I know that well enough," the stalwart servant respectfully answered; "he often spoke affectionately of you. I was the only one who understood him, mad or sane," he continued; "I attended him at the private asylum, and I have been with him ever since."

"Do not think I mistrust you for a moment," Cecil said gently, "but you changed a note at the 'Saracen's Head,' and I thought perhaps—" and he paused as he saw the old servant's eye flash for a moment as he drew himself haughtily up.

"I am well-to-do, sir," he replied; "this cottage and bit of land belongs to me; I always keep it well furnished, and let it to tourists in the

summer; and I own houses in Hampton Lovett, Mrs. Sykes would tell you, and I have a good balance in the Post Office Savings Bank and Stock in the Three per Cents."

"I am sure I beg your pardon," Tarleton said.

The servant's brow cleared. "I am sorry, sir, I cannot advise or help you to find my lost master; his father died in my arms; the family made me, and I would give all I possess and years of my life to see Mr. Dick standing here now in his right mind."

Cecil could see he was speaking the truth, and he held out his hand. The old servant grasped it in his muscular grip, and Tarleton felt the strength that lay in that arm and hand. "I believe you," he replied. The old retainer gravely thanked him, and Cecil went sadly back to the "Saracen's Head."

"Avice was much better, and eagerly desired his coming," was the message he received from Upcott's next morning; and when he reached the cottage he found she was indeed much better in every way. The relief of the mental strain she had experienced the day before, the knowledge that she had a 'very parfait gentil knight,' '*sans peur et sans reproche*,' devoted to her interests, the elasticity of her naturally strong constitution, had acted and reacted on each other, and she was able to welcome him without any appearance of that lassitude that had overcome her previously.

CHAPTER XVI.

THEY were alone in Mrs. Earle's pretty sitting-room. Pictures of Mrs. Earle's father as he died, sword in hand, cheering on his men on the heights of Alma, of the blowing up of the Cashmere gate at Delhi by the devoted little band of British heroes, to make way for their storming party; and where her uncle had died as he lighted the fuse, adorned the walls. Antique silver plaque brackets, taken from the loot of the Summer Palace at Pekin, now filled with British flowers, and brought home by another of her martial race, were on tables about the room. Rich gold embossed draperies, which covered the couches, and an ebony cabinet, jet black, and carved deeply with Ceylon fruits and flowers, were the sole relics of the time when her husband, and her son afterwards, had been prosperous coffee-planters. Cecil looked round the room on the abundance of pretty trifles, showing woman's refining influence; and he sighed, as he knew how he would ever be a solitary bachelor, for the world contained but one love to him, and she was to him but as a dear sister.

"You have not told me all you can, Avice," he

said. "Now please answer all my questions. Believe me, in all I ask you I have but one motive—your happiness."

"You need not have said that," she murmured. "Surely I will tell you all you wish to know; I have nothing to conceal," she added proudly.

Cecil looked at that pure innocent face and ground his teeth. "If I could but find that lying, incarnate devil," he thought, "I would tear out his slanderous black heart."

"Tell me, Avice," he said, "did you have any lovers before your marriage to Dick?"

She looked at him in puzzled, pained surprise. "You were the only one, and that was many years ago," she said softly, while the tears filled her eyes.

"Forgive me, dear Avice, I did not mean that. I meant, was there anyone that admired you?—though of course I know you must have had many admirers," he said; "but anyone in particular?"

Avice shuddered. "Those wicked men who used to gamble at mamma's house were always making me unhappy. I hated them all. There was one of them—Captain Disney Keene he called himself, but I am sure it was not his right name—of whom I was more afraid than all the others. He treated me more respectfully than they did, and seemed to take upon himself the right to protect me from their attentions. But I was more afraid of him than the others. He was

a man of education and, I think, good birth, and less coarse and low than the rest, yet somehow my instinct told me he was worse. They were all afraid of him; he never blustered or bullied, as some of the others did, but a look from his black eyes and a word or two from him would cow the noisiest and loudest of them.

"That man always seemed to have the same effect on me which some deadly snake might have—there was a sense of such a terrible power for evil in him. After a time he became my living nightmare, for I found that he was beginning to make love to me. He did not take up the position of a rival to Dick, but sometimes there was in his manner towards me a sense of proprietorship. No one else would have noticed it, and it was not sufficiently expressed for me to resent it, and yet I was always conscious of it.

"It was just after I was married. He must have watched, for he came when Dick was out, and told me that a police raid had been pending, and that mamma had gone to the Continent, and then he spoke out, and I had proof positive of how bad he was. I seemed to lose all my fear for him then, and I told him how I hated and despised him. He laughed that quiet laugh of his, as he twisted the long pointed ends of his black moustache and listened to my outburst, and said that it was not all over between us, but that some day I would understand him, and know that his love was worth more than that of

a poor fool and dupe like Dick Gainsborough. In my anger I forgot my dread of the man; but afterwards, when I remembered the way he spoke and looked, I began to dread him more than ever, for I could see he was a dangerous enemy."

Cecil Tarleton thought of the letters, and he felt little doubt as to their author. Avice had drawn what to him was a vivid picture of the man who had, with such fiendish cunning, plotted her ruin and disgrace. But how had he worked? What was the mystery of those two letters?

"Did you ever visit a house in Blank Street, Chelsea?" asked Cecil, going straight to the awkward point, as if he were cross-examining at the Old Bailey.

There was no look of confusion in Avice's face or manner as she answered—

"Yes, I did; I never told anyone. I was going to tell Dick, only I had no opportunity. It was a curious story. There was a young man called Tredegar; he was weak and silly, but he was not wicked like the rest, and he might have been made a good man if it had not been for those he met at my mother's house, and for me. It is terrible in this world how one may influence others to their hurt when one has no evil intention. I think if it had not been for me he would not have come there so often; but he thought himself in love with me. Not that he wasn't fond enough of play and gambling for their own sakes. Well, they ruined him, and not only was

he ruined, but he got into some terrible trouble about some bills that amounted to crime.

"It was after my marriage, and bitterly did I blame myself for the part I had unintentionally taken in luring him to his fate. I heard that he was in hiding from the police, and one day I received a letter from him entreating me, as a last favour to him, to come and see him. I was the only person he could trust, and there was something he wished to tell me. He begged me not to tell Dick, who had always disliked and mistrusted him.

"It was foolish of me, but I determined not to tell Dick, and go and help him if possible.

"I went to the house, and was shown into a sitting-room, where I waited for some time, and then was told that Mr. Tredegar was too ill to see me then, and I went away.

"The other day I saw young Tredegar's death in the papers; he died in Spain."

"Have you still got the letter?" asked Cecil.

"Yes, it is the only thing I have left from Ritherdons," Avice replied; "it seemed to me that there was something strange and wrong about it, and when I saw the news of young Tredegar's death I put it in my pocket that terrible night, intending to show it to Mrs. Earle, as I thought, from what Dick had said, we were coming to Upcott's that evening. I had determined to show it to Dick and tell him the whole story," and, going to a sandalwood writing table,

she opened a drawer and took out a letter, which she gave Cecil.

"Have you any other of young Tredegar's letters?"

"No, I have never received any others from him."

"Have you anything from Disney Keene?"

"No, he never wrote to me; but, Cecil! what do you mean? What do you suspect?"

"He wrote this letter," Cecil thought; "she was right in thinking him a dangerous enemy. He has played a bold game, and so far the changes have all gone in his favour."

"I will explain to you later, dear," he said gently, and Avice looked trustfully at him.

"Did anyone ever give you presents of jewellery?" he continued.

"Never," Avice answered, amazedly. "You know I was at school until my father died, and mamma never gave me anything. I had nothing when Dick married me," and her eyes grew moist at the recollection of the gifts he had showered on her immediately after their marriage—now represented by a few shapeless masses of metal discovered in the ruins of Ritherdons Grange.

"And now, Avice, one last question. Do you know this tie and stud?"

She started as she examined them. "The stud I know well; Dick wore it that dreadful night. I used to make his ties; let me see." And she took it in her trembling fingers. "Yes, I made

this—look!" And she showed him the white initials, "R.G.," she had sewn at the back.

"They were part of the things picked up," Cecil said, evasively, in answer to her inquiring look; and Avice asked no more. She was content to listen to all he told her; all was mystery and darkness to her.

"Who were Dick's bankers and lawyers?"

She gave him their names and addresses.

"What money have you got?"

Avice smiled mournfully. "This is Mary's dress; I have nothing in the world. Dick kept all the banking accounts, and when I wanted money he used to give me the key of the safe—you saw it at Ritherdons—and bid me take what I wanted. We generally kept about £200 in it, and all I had to do was to write a memorandum on a piece of paper of the amount I took, and leave it in the safe for him, so that he could balance his accounts. I have not wanted any since we came back," she continued.

"Well, here is £50 from the proceeds of part of the jewellery, at all events," he said, as he gave her the notes; "that will do to go on with until I have seen the bankers and lawyers. I shall then know how to act further."

Avice took the notes unquestioningly; she knew he was doing all he could for the best.

The little market town where Squire Gainsborough banked, and where his old family solicitors resided, was not far distant from the other

side of Ritherdons Moor; and after promising to return and dine at Upcott's that evening, in response to the united affectionate request of the ladies as they accompanied him to the gate, he once more walked along Hampton Lovett Lane, and passed out of the wood on to Ritherdons Moor.

On this occasion the thousand bright colours and sweet scents and sounds of the country summer's day did not afford him but a vague sense of bodily comfort and mental strength, his anxious thoughts were too absorbing. He had quickened his pace as he passed the spot where the blackened ruins of Ritherdons Grange lay; and as he walked swiftly along the road through the moor, he paused for a moment at the cross-ways, close to which grim Holgar's Barrow lowered beetling and massive with its huge masonry.

"This place is an unhallowed spot," Cecil thought, with a shudder; "here beneath my feet, at these cross-roads, suicides have been buried with a stake driven through their bodies, and here, in a past generation, murderers have dangled in chains from their gibbets. How many tortured human beings have died within those walls—sacrificial victims of the fierce creed of Dick's pagan ancestors. Where can Gainsborough be?" he mused, as, with a start, he hurried on. "That he escaped from burning Ritherdons is certain, the supposition that, driven by his

darkened brain, he had come to the temple of his Druid ancestors, the finding of his stud and tie makes probable; but where *can* he be now? His old servant knows nothing, that is certain; I could read truth in every word the old retainer said; those letters, too, and the necklace; and I know Avice is as innocent as a little child, and pure as driven snow. All is mystery. I wonder if either the banker or lawyer can elucidate it," he thought, as he entered the High Street of the red brick-built market town.

He had no occasion to ask his way; in front of him, and facing the market cross erected to commemorate the bringing of Great Edward's Queen through England—the last of which was erected at the village of Charing, London—was the bank, with its Grecian *façade* and Corinthian columns. He passed up the broad steps and sent in his card, and was soon in earnest conversation with the principal. Avice had given him two brief lines appointing him to act fully for her in every particular.

"I am deeply grieved at what you tell me," the courteous banker said. "Mr. Gainsborough, on the occasion of his last journey to London, now some little time ago, withdrew all his valuables from our bank, leaving only a balance of a few hundreds to his current account. Since then he drew a cheque for a couple of hundreds; and the balance of his account, a very small amount, is all we hold of his. It is only under the extra-

ordinary circumstances you have detailed, and your being a barrister, and producing Mrs. Gainsborough's letter of introduction, that I could have told you so much."

Tarleton thanked him warmly, and took his leave.

From the directions given him by the banker he soon found the offices of the family solicitors of the Gainsboroughs.

"I am astounded at what you tell me," the old baldheaded solicitor said in amaze, as he pushed his gold-rimmed spectacles on his forehead and gazed at Tarleton. "Dear, dear! why, my dear sir, I haven't even got the will I made for him directly after his marriage, leaving all to Madam Gainsborough; he has no nearer relations than distant cousins, nor the title-deeds of Ritherdons. Not that that bit of land is of much value to anyone now," he added sorrowfully. "Not a scrip, nor a bond, nor a stock; he took them all away one day—months ago. I thought it strange, but never dreamed they were going farther than the vaults of the bank in the next street. Eh! eh!" and he took a huge pinch of snuff. "Very unprofessional indeed; poor fellow, poor fellow; bad business, my dear sir, bad business."

And that was all the information Cecil Tarleton could get from the kindly, fussy little solicitor, as he came to the door and bid him good-bye.

"The mystery thickens," Cecil thought as he left the town and walked over the intervening miles to the moor and Hampton Lovett Lane. "Was ever lady in such a contradictory position as poor Avice? A wife without a husband; wealthy, yet penniless; well in body and sick at heart. I hope to heaven that unknown villain who has gained such an influence over Dick, be it male or female, has not got possession of him and all that easily convertible wealth. In addition to the missing Gainsborough plate, from what the banker and solicitor told me there must be at least £50,000 of title-deeds, scrip, stocks, and bonds missing. Many payable to bearer, too. Good heavens! what is best to be done, and what can I tell Avice?" he groaned, as Upcott's cottage came in sight and he entered the gate. "I can tell her nothing. I can, I am sorry to say, give you no definite information at present," he said to the three ladies; "you may rely on my doing so the instant I hear."

"We trust you implicitly, Mr. Tarleton," Mrs. Earle responded; "you look tired and harassed; come to dinner;" and Cecil gratefully responded, and spent a peaceful evening in that quiet haven of rest—an English lady's home.

"In any case, I shall return in a week," he said at parting. "Of course, if you hear any news or want me, telegraph at once, and I will come immediately;" and late that night he re-arrived in London. "The secret of silent Rither-

dons Grange and its missing squire is still an impenetrable mystery," he thought as he listened to the rush and roar of London; "the quiet country holds as dread secrets as the roaring town, but every man is immortal until he fulfils his task, and my life is now devoted to aid the ancient House of Gainsborough of Ritherdons."

CHAPTER XVII.

It had been a wild night in the English Channel, and the sun rose with misty yellow beams, struggling through a bank of lowering clouds. The wind, which had whistled and moaned through the creaking rigging and flapping sails of the vessels that thronged that ocean highway, had gone down with muffled sobbings and wailings, and only the tumultuous sea remained as evidence of the unquiet spirits that had been passing over it in the blackness of the night.

In every gradation of green, from the dull, deep colour that lined the innermost recesses of the waves as they reared themselves threateningly aloft, their white crests angrily tossing and nodding defiance for a moment before they fell on each other in commingled fury and wrath, to the pale light green which, after it had limned on the surface of the sea every delicate gradation of the colour, now tinged the distant horizon.

The deck of the good ship *Arcot* was bare of passengers in the early dawn, and only the crew of the watch huddled under the lee bulwarks. Two sailors clad in sou'-westers and long sea-boots grasped the wheel at the stern with their

brawny hands, and, with the exception of the watchful captain, who stood on the bridge with his third mate near him, were the only signs of life on the glistening wet decks. The vessel plunged through the water, her bows at one time high in air, her hull, bright red at the bottom, and her shapely black upperworks, shining out vividly against the streams of white and green as the foaming waves gave way and dashed past her stately lines. Below, the majority of the passengers were asleep, keeping company with Earle, who was snoring peacefully in the lower berth, which, as became a wary old traveller, he had promptly secured in the cabin he and Jim Bolitho occupied. That ornament to his profession, Jim Bolitho, however, was sleepless, and he gladly welcomed the first streaks of daylight that began to glimmer in at the port-hole. "Gladly," however, is hardly a word to describe his feelings, as he was totally indifferent to all sublunary things. His feelings were somewhat akin to those of the hero of the following beautiful poem :—

"What cared he for love or grief?
What cared he for joy or care?
He'd trod on a piece of mottled soap
The slavey had left on the topmost stair.
And his feet flew out like wild, fierce things,
And he bumped down the stairs with a sound like a drum;
And the damsel below with the scrubbing things
Laughed like the fiend to see him come."

So it had been with Jim the night before; his

feet had flown out like wild, fierce things, and he had bumped down the companion stairs and been helped, a limp, moist, unpleasant body, into the berth in which he now lay.

"Mr. Earle!" he groaned, "Mr. Thomas Earle! Earle, you beast!"

Earle woke up. "Hullo, what's the matter now?"

"I have only one comfort on this earth," Jim groaned. "You will go to sheol when you die, Mr. Earle. I am a pagan now, and you have made me one. I've thrown up everything I have ever possessed inside me, and now, as I had nothing left, I've thrown up my immortal soul. I desire, Mr. Earle, if I ever reach land again, you never address me again. I'll renounce all the treasures in Ceylon for space enough of dry ground to wring your neck on—oh!" and Jim appeared to be wrestling with his soul, and trying to get rid of any remains of it.

"Would you renounce Mary—poor Mary?" a pathetic voice came from the berth below.

Jim gruntled at this idea. "Gruntled" implies a series of noncommittal sounds, but expressing disgust with the world in general. Then there was a pause, the silence only broken by the monotonous thud, thud of the screw as the *Arcot* ploughed her way through the waste of waters, and when, with a "swish," the wave-crests splashed across the bull's-eye porthole.

Then a meek voice was heard, "Tom! Tom!"

"Don't presume to address me in future, Mr. Bolitho," Earle said, as he lay back in his berth and silently grinned.

"Oh, Tom, have pity on a vacuum—you know nature abhors a vacuum. You would not have nature abhor me, would you?" came a plaintive voice. "I am a bruised, hollow reed. You are not to break the bruised reed, you know, from Sunday School days."

"All right, old man, 'bide a wee,' as the Scotch say," and Earle got out of his berth and interviewed the steward. "Here you are, Jim," and he handed him a glass of iced champagne. "This is the best cure in the world. Have a sleep, and I'll get you some Bovril by-and-bye." It is the best thing to take for sea-sickness."

Jim drained the glass, and feebly asked for more.

"That's a sure sign you have turned the corner," Tom Earle said, encouragingly; and so it proved, for Jim rapidly mended after a sleep and some Bovril, and reached the deck later in the day, and soon became the most ravenous eater on board, with Tom making a good second.

The *Arcot* put into Malta for a couple of hours to coal, and they went on shore with the third mate and visited the monastery, where the skeletons of dead-and-gone monks are ranged against the walls, fastened up by iron girdles in the habits they wore when alive. And the monk, their guide, showed them, with as much of the

sin of pride as was consistent with being a monk and lowly brother, the little pedestal he had prepared for his own skeleton to stand on. And he stood looking at it with an air of complacent proprietorship, until Jim and Tom got him away by saying they wanted to see the alms box of the monastery—that fetched him.

"For goodness' sake let's have a drink," they both implored the third mate, "to take the taste of those skeletons out of our mouths."

"Here we are," that gentleman said, cheerfully; "now listen to me take a rise out of the landlord," as they entered a cosy English tavern. They were soon served with "English draught beer, gentlemen, same as you get at home. Don't the gentlemen and folks coming from India and the Straits, and all the East, relish their first glass of draught bitter after all the bottled stuff; they come here in shoals to get it, and some of 'em dances and says it's the first thing that reminds them of home, next to seeing an English policeman here in uniform."

The beer was excellent, and as they repeated the dose the third officer, with a grave air of innocent inquiry, asked their worthy host if he was not a Kentish man? The host promptly danced about his bar in a temper: "No, sir! no, sir! I am a man of Kent!" The courteous officer profoundly apologised, but Jim and Tom, who were in the secret, nearly choked with suppressed laughter.

"When the men of Kent fought William the Conqueror at Hastings he admired their bravery so much that he gave them a number of privileges," the landlord explained to them, "which we men of Kent still hold; but the Kentish men, the other side of the River Medway, they stayed at home, and he not only gave them no privileges, but took a lot away from them." On the strength of this bit of history they all had drinks round again, including the appeased landlord, and hastened on board.

They had passed Gibraltar at night, and missed seeing that mighty fortress, in shape like a lion *couchant*, the first emblem of England's watchful sovereignty in the East, and nothing particular occurred until they reached Port Said, where they were to coal for some hours, and start in the early morning.

"Now, if you will take my advice," the doctor on board said, who had taken a great liking to them both, "you won't take more than three sovereigns apiece on shore; if once you get into the *rouge et noir* casino you will probably be cleared out of every red cent you have with you."

This was sensible advice, and Earle and Bolitho took it; and, after a dinner at a *café chantant*, they took a stroll round the curious town, about the wickedest place on the face of the earth, with its population of the offscourings of the Levant. The houses were all of wood, and the streets more than ankle deep in sand from the neighbour-

ing Sahara, or the Great Desert. And after one or two villainous drinks at one or two villainous-looking places, they strolled into the gambling den, where three portly and red-fezzed Turks presided over a roulette wheel which was in the middle of a long table. A number of the passengers of the *Arcot* were there, including the doctor, and they were met with a hilarious shout of welcome. The game, *i.e.*, the table and its appurtenances, was perfectly fair; in fact, in such a turbulent community no one would have dared to keep an unfair table, as the sharps who were constantly gambling would have instantly detected any unfair play with their keen eyes. Both Jim and Tom at once joined in the game. A roulette wheel is a round disc of dark painted wood, with a number of figures, numbering from one to thirty-six, painted in black and red alternately inside; a small ball is in the shallow disc, and as the pointer in the middle of the disc is whirled round by the presiding croupier, the ball rapidly spins round and darts from one of the numbered receptacles to the others, until, as the wheel revolves more slowly and finally stops, it finds a resting-place. The table is covered with squares each bearing a number to correspond with the numbers in the wheel, and as the ball at last rests in one receptacle round the wheel, the number is called out, and those players who had staked on that number receive thirty-six times their stake, and the rest lose. There are

also other various modes of betting on the numbers, such as whether the numbers will be even or odd, the betting being level; and by placing a stake on the junction of four numbers, so as to back the chance of one of the four turning up, in which case the bettor gets nine times his stake, or half of thirty-six if he bets on two numbers by placing his stakes half way in each square; and lastly, there are two large squares painted red and black, if the players wish to bet on the colours of the receptacles in which the ball should fall, and not on the numbers. The slight odds in favour of the bank are that two compartments are marked zero and double zero, in the latter case the bank taking half of each of the stakes, leaving the remainder to be decided by the next whirl of the wheel; or, in the case of zero turning up, sweeping the board of all the stakes with the exception of those who may have chanced to back zero.

Small as these advantages appear, all roulette tables repay their owners handsome returns.

Tom promptly lost all he possessed, and went to the doctor. "I expected this," he said, laughing; "I will lend you three pounds more until you get on board, if you promise you won't borrow any more from anyone if you lose."

Tom promptly gave the required promise, and was going up to the table, when Jim came to the doctor with a similar request, which was granted on the same conditions. Tom Earle again lost

all his, and, being "cleaned out," watched the proceedings. Jim Bolitho was reduced to his last sovereign, which he threw down on the compartment marked number seven. Seven turned up in the wheel, and the red-fezzed Turk handed him thirty-six sovereigns. Uproarious applause followed on the part of the passengers of the *Arcot*, who had all lost, some considerably.

Again and again Jim tried the various numbers, but without success, until his capital, after repaying the doctor, had dwindled to £15. At last he placed a sovereign on eleven; eleven turned up in the wheel, obediently responsive to his wish on this occasion. Again £36 were handed to him, and in another hour he would probably have lost every one of them had not the third officer come to the gambling saloon and called out in stentorian tones, "Now then, you Arcotites, all on board; look sharp, our boats are waiting," and passengers and officers hurried to the landing-stage.

As was meet he should under the circumstances, Jim stood champagne round to the officers and the passengers who had not gone to bed, one man who had turned in being dragged from his berth to participate, and Jim was the lion of the evening.

They were fortunate in passing through the Suez Canal without any delay, and a few days steaming across the Indian Ocean brought them in immediate proximity to Ceylon. There was

no need to mention they were nearing land—a heavy, subtle, delicious perfume of ten thousand mingled flowers and herbs and shrubs and fruits filled the sea air.

"When you wake, ladies and gentlemen, you will see the cocoanut palms and wharves of Colombo," was the head steward's final announcement that night, and a cheer rose from the assembled passengers.

The next morning, amid hearty farewells, Tom and Jim, with their small belongings in a bullock bandy behind them, were walking, with a native as a guide, to the "Galle Face Hotel."

CHAPTER XVIII.

"TIME is precious to us," Earle said to Bolitho next morning; "we will go and get our gem-diggers' licenses now," and after a few formalities and the payment of some small fees they were entitled to own whatever gems they might find. Otherwise, as unlicensed gem hunters, all gems or precious metals found by them would have been the lawful property of Her Most Gracious Majesty the Empress of India and Ceylon, a lady who certainly has a number of most varied interests in all parts of our globe.

They left, after a pleasant day in Colombo, by the night train for Kandy, the up-country capital, arriving there in the cool of the early dawn. After a wash and change at the "Queen's Hotel," the great resort of the planters of the island, their clothes were handed to a "dhoby" or native male washer-man, with instructions to bring them next day. Amongst other excellent qualities, which are not perhaps so prominent, the Singhalese are among the best carpenters, cooks, washermen, and gem-cutters in the world.

The day was spent under Earle's supervision in making a few necessary purchases and guarded

inquiries. Of their purchases, the two most important were two "tats," or hardy mountain ponies, warranted to climb the steepest hills with the surefootedness, if not the speed, of deer, and strong gem belts, divided into compartments, for their waists.

"If we find we want one, we can easily get a native servant in either of the districts of Dimbula or Dickoya, through both of which we must pass before we reach the ruined and abandoned Maskelyia valley. Our real search does not commence until we pass through the valley, and under the shadow of Adam's Peak, one of the highest mountains on the globe, and on the summit of which is the impression of a gigantic human foot, supposed by the Buddhists to be one of the holiest spots in the world, and the last mark made on earth by Adam before he ascended into heaven. Not far from there, too, is supposed to be the mysterious, but hitherto undiscovered, valley where sick and aged elephants go to die, and which is supposed to be filled up with costly ivory. It certainly is an extraordinary circumstance that it is only on such rare occasions as to be practically never, a skeleton of an elephant is to be found in the jungles of Ceylon, though thousands must have died in ages past. Taprobane, which was the ancient name of Ceylon, was mentioned in the 'Arabian Nights' in the 'Travels of Sinbad the Sailor,' and he describes himself as being the only one who ever found this mysterious valley. Having been sold as a

slave to a Singhalese, he used to be sent to shoot elephants with poisoned arrows, but the sagacious animals, seeing he only slew them for their ivory, made one elephant seize him and carry him to where the heaped-up skeletons lay, so that he should help himself to the ivory and spare the living; which, until he made his escape, taking the secret of the valley with him, shortly afterwards, he did."

"Good old yarn," Jim said; "I remember it. When do we start?"

"To-night we will ride all night by moonlight. If anyone ever questions you, remember we are going to the Ratnapoora district, where gems are mostly found. Our going to the Maskelyia Valley is a secret between you and I."

Jim nodded assent.

"I have made arrangements with a merchant in Kandy to send on our boxes in the usual way to the 'rest-house' at the Dickoya Gap; we shall find them there on our arrival. After that we must go boldly into the abandoned Maskelyia Valley, and then press forward into the hitherto unexplored jungle. I have often studied the maps and bearings poor Singleton sent me, and I know my way with certainty. The last semblance of civilization we shall see until our return will be the ruined bungalow and 'stores' on his deserted plantation."

"All right, old man," Jim said cheerfully. "I would go to the end of the world—as it appears

I am now doing—and back again, I hope—with you."

And after leaving Gampola, they passed along the great roads that led through the districts of Dimbula and Dickoya to Maskelyia. Bolitho and Earle kept their secret, and quickly arrived at the confines of civilization, and found themselves facing the gloomy primeval forest.

"This was poor Singleton's estate," Earle said, as he looked sadly round on the shattered wrecks of the buildings and machinery, now idly rusting amid the fallen masonry; "only one man left out of his hundreds of once busy coolies," and they rode towards him. The coolie approached wonderingly; no "masters" had been seen by him or his half-savage family in that lonely and abandoned place for years. As Earle drew nearer the coolie looked at him with puzzled recognition, and then uttered a glad cry as he salaamed deeply before him.

"My old master's friend; is it indeed you after all these years?" he said, and Earle addressed him in Tamil. They spoke long and earnestly, and at last Earle turned to Jim.

"This man was Singleton's body servant, and could not bear to leave this place like the rest. He remembers Singleton bringing home the silver god, and, like the rest, believes his accidental death to have been a judgment. He has offered to accompany us and carry all we may need; this is indeed luck, for he does not care a straw for

all the treasures himself; he has his family and poultry, and his garden; he grows all he needs, and is contented like the rest of his race."

They had their two tat ponies on which they rode, and a third one laden with their saddle bags and necessaries; and, after a short delay for final arrangements, they pushed forward from the weed-choked clearing into the forest. As they penetrated deeper and deeper into its recesses, the wondering Wanderoo monkeys and squirrels and wild cats gambolled in the wild spice trees over their heads, and leapt from bough to bough. Green and red flecked lizards scuttled away under their feet, and bright-hued butterflies, gold beetles, and dragon flies flashed past them in the sun. Snakes glided through the underwood, and hares and tiny deer fled at their approach. Tom Earle led the way, compass and maps in hand, as they pressed on mile after mile. Jim Bolitho followed next, carrying his ready revolver, and the patient coolie led the string of horses.

The shadows deepened as hour after hour passed on, and the primeval forest grew more dense. At last Earle paused and pointed with his hand. "See," he said, "at last!" In front of them, where an abrupt turning in the forest had brought them suddenly in full view of them, were the ruins of a once mighty city. Silent, mysterious, untenanted, save by wild beasts, it lay there, sparkling white in the rays of the setting sun.

The coolie trembled with dread as he saw one of those mysterious cities that lie buried here and there in the depths of the Ceylon forests. Throwing himself on the ground with many a prayer and supplication, he implored them not to go further.

"We shall camp here," Earle said to him. "You need not come with us to-morrow;" and, partially reassured, he rose to his feet, and busied himself with lighting a fire and unloading the tat pony. There is not a handier body-servant in the world than a Tamil "appoo," who has been trained to wait on Europeans; and in a short while he had a curry cooked and a dinner deftly prepared.

"It has saved us a lot of bother picking him up," Earle said to Jim, nodding at the coolie, who, at a respectful distance, was busy picking the bones of the chickens and eating his rice, for, as a low caste coolie, he had no objections to finishing the remnants of his masters' meal. "We will finish our pipes and turn in; all must be up by dawn to-morrow," and rolling themselves in the native "cumblies," or coarse blankets, they had brought with them, they fell asleep until the early dawn.

There are no tigers in Ceylon, and a large fire is sufficient to frighten all animals away, and they knew the watchful coolie would keep the fires well replenished, and have a vigilant eye for snakes, which, unless provoked or attacked,

are more timid of man than of any creeping thing.

With the first glimmering of dawn, the bats and nocturnal birds returned to their accustomed haunts, the jackal and the leopard stole back from their nightly chase, the elephants returned timidly into the shade of the forest from their water pools, and the deep-toned bark of the elk resounded through the glens. Day broke, and its earliest blush showed the mists that overhung the ruined city, tumbling in turbulent heaps through the deep valleys, like battalions of dark evil spirits fleeing before the gleaming weapons of the sun-god.

The sun burst upwards with a speed beyond that which marks his progress in the cloudy atmosphere of Europe, and the whole horizon glowed with ruddy lustre. At no other moment does the sub-tropical verdure of Ceylon mountain forests appear as vivid, each leaf and spray sparkling with copious dew, and the threads of the gossamer hanging from tree to tree, glistening like ropes of pearls. Then the birds saluted the coming day with every kind of tuneful melody. First the crow, the harbinger of morn in Ceylon, then the cranes in the wild rice-covered marshes round the buried city, and then the yellow orioles, bulbuls, sunbirds and jungle cocks, and finally, the parrots added their chatter to the din.

"Hullo! Tom, wake up," Jim said as he sat up to see the coolie squatted on his hams near

him, and engaged in making toast at the wood fire.

"Oh, Jerusalem! how stiff I am," and he rose and yawned and stretched himself.

"Salaam, sahib."

"Oh, salaam, you lump of ebony," Jim responded, with elaborate politeness, to the grinning coolie's infinite delight.

Earle was now sitting up rubbing his eyes, and the trio made an excellent Ceylon early breakfast. A tiny waterfall was trickling down the precipice near them, and after a dive into the fresh, cold water of the pool it had formed, they felt fit enough to carry off a city full of treasure.

After Earle had given the coolie instructions to prepare the best dinner he could by the time dusk came on—about six o'clock—Earle and Bolitho buckled on their revolvers and gem belts, and loading the spare pony with a luncheon, crowbars, coils of rope, and various other impedimenta, they wound downwards round the mountain to where the lost city and the temples lay. The temples were carved deep into the solid faces of the precipices, and were clustered together in what at first appeared to Earle and Bolitho bewildering confusion.

"Look for our first landmark, Jim," Earle said, as he tied the halter of the tat pony to the stone horn of the life-sized figure of a bull cut in granite, and which, revolving on a pivot, made the entrance to a ruined palace. "Look for a

stone slab about 13 feet long and 10 feet broad in a single piece."

"Here it is!" shouted Jim.

"Now then for the dagoba, a hundred feet to the right."

"What is a dagoba?" Jim said, as he peered about as if it were something to eat.

"A dagoba is a bell-shaped tomb surmounted by a spire, a species of architecture the same in all countries which worship Buddha. It was erected generations after these surrounding ruins by the race who worshipped Buddha and came here—the Shoe-Madoo of Pegu, the Tapharama of Ceylon, and the Baru Buda of Lama of Thibet are all types of the same building. Hullo! here it is; the temple cave where the treasure is is carved on the face of the precipice facing it."

"What makes it shine so brightly?" Jim asked, as he looked curiously at the dagoba as it scintillated and sparkled in the early morning sun.

"It is built of brick, and encrusted with a preparation of lime, cocoanut water, and the juice of the fruit paragaha; this preparation hardens into a pure white, and is as durable as marble. How it glances in the sun! No wonder Singleton named it as the landmark. We are not here to study the architecture of the place, however; there lies the cave, and in it our fortunes."

"Hurrah!" Jim shouted, "come on;" and they soon reached the mound of earth and frag-

ments of carving and detached masonry that nearly blocked up the entrance.

For a moment they paused and looked at it, and Earle turned to Jim.

"The reason these magnificent palaces were deserted and allowed to fall into ruins was that wars and pestilence so reduced the number of the people of these races that have passed away that the remainder were unable to maintain the great embankments of their artificial lakes. These having burst, their waters spread over the country, as their channels were neglected, and this made their cities' unhealthiness permanent by forming the noxious swamps and the unwholesome forests we have passed through, beautiful and baneful in their luxuriance.

"And all these prehistoric ruins, and even the lofty monuments of later times, known to be sacred to the religion of Buddha, are either entirely covered with jungle or obscured by forests; and the imaginations of the natives people them with unholy phantoms, spirits of the unrighteous, doomed for ever to wander about these mouldering walls. And now only the shrill trumpet of the elephant, the startling rush of wild hog and deer, the harsh screams of peacock and toucan, increase the solemn feeling inspired by a gloomy forest waving over a buried city."

"The time for moralizing has passed—that for action has begun, Tom," Jim sententiously observed.

"Go and bring the pony," was the response.

While Jim was gone, Earle carefully scanned the entrance, and fastened the end of a long ball of twine to the arm of one of the gods who guarded the gate on either side. Jim returned with the pony and their hearts beat fast as they shook hands in silence while they looked at the face of the precipice that towered high above them, until its summit was hidden by scudding, fleecy clouds.

There were thousands of niches cut into the rock, where lamps on occasions of festival had been formerly placed. Round and above them the patient artificers of a lost race had deeply carved cunning devices on the stone. The patterns were so convoluted and intricate that the eye was lost in a maze of bewildering turns; foliage, flowers, fruits were carved in the living stone, together with inscriptions and sentences in a language so dead and forgotten that not an understood letter remained. Forms, half beast half human, and gigantic figures of the unknown gods and goddesses of the dead race, looked down on them with stony, impassive eyes.

Behind Jim and Tom stretched the ruined streets of the dead city in shapeless masses of carved ruins. Near these, half hidden by a tree which had spread its branching roots over it, lay a trough of solid stone over twenty feet long, and six feet broad and deep, out of which the State elephants in past ages had drunk—where

was all the splendour now?—the crowds of gold and gem-bedecked courtiers, the gaily-clad dancing girls, the crush and hum of the busy multitude as they surged forward to see their king clad in kincob or cloth of beaten gold—go ask the eagle that was killing a snake on the shattered steps of the broken throne in the audience hall.

"Come," Earle said; and, after a few moments' busy preparation—for all their plans had been made with careful forethought—taking the ball of twine in their hands and unrolling it as they advanced, they climbed the rugged mass and stood at the gloomy entrance through which dead Singleton had gone. For over a thousand years but one man, and he one of England's pioneer race, a white stranger from beyond the seas, had penetrated the mystery that lay in the womb of the mountain; and now two more of Britannia's hardy sons were following in his footsteps.

Before the English entered India, an Eastern king captured and slew two English travellers who had reached his domains. A few years afterwards an intrepid friend followed and traced them, and boldly asked the potentate where his fellow-countrymen were.

"How!" exclaimed the astonished monarch; "I have destroyed scores of cities, I have conquered many nations, I have captured tens of thousands of slaves, and no one dared to ask for them; and lo! I slay but two Englishmen, and

one more comes from the confines of the earth to question me. Thy friends are dead; but for thy sake I release a thousand nobles. Take the best of my treasury, without stint, and go."

And it is this hardy Anglo-Saxon spirit that has made England the chief ruler of the earth, and had brought Tom Earle and Jim Bolitho there.

They passed through the huge outer cave, its walls covered with vermilion-painted gods as fresh as if done yesterday, and where the countless worshippers had thronged; the lights from the lamps they wore at their waistbelts, and the torches they held, throwing red splashes and yellow rays of light forward through the Cimmerian blackness.

"The twine is finished, Jim; tie another ball on the end, and let it trail loosely on the floor," Earle whispered, as they passed through another cavern; "while you do so, I will look at the place."

Jim obeyed without speaking.

"See," Earle muttered, "there is the elephant-headed god, with its twenty arms; they almost seem to move as if threatening us," and in the flickering light of the torches it appeared as if the twenty arms, each hand holding one of the emblems of the god, waved menacingly at them. "Fire your revolver, Jim; it will bring in a current of air."

Jim did so; the echo of the shot pealed and roared in the re-echoing caverns, the countless

bats overhead flew wildly about in a dense crowd, and the sound of their wings was like the beating of the storm-tossed surf on an ironbound coast. Fragments of rock fell from the roof, one huge piece falling close to Jim and Tom with a crash.

"A narrow escape," Jim said.

"Yes," Earle replied, "I forgot that might happen from the concussion of the air; but feel the difference," he continued, as a fresh current of pure air poured in to take the place of the stagnant air that had been undisturbed by storm or man for ages, and which had now flown out of the entrance, while the pure air filled every nook and cranny. Tom and Jim drew long breaths.

"Come quickly," Earle said; "we bear to the right now; give me a hold on the string," and they hurried round the frowning god.

The way grew narrower as they passed through chamber after chamber, ever decreasing in size, and in which, step by step, the novitiate of the priesthood was, with majestic rites and ceremonies and passwords, ever advanced further in knowledge of the dread secrets of the gods he worshipped as he rose through the different grades.

They shuddered as they saw here and there a skeleton, the distorted and broken limbs showing how the victim had perished. In one side chamber they entered, through a momentary mistake of Earle's, as he looked at the plan, rows

of grizzly skeletons hung skulls downwards from the walls, the integuments and remnants of parched skin in most cases keeping the bones together in the dry air of the place. Instruments of torture of every conceivable shape and size were methodically ranged round the walls, and were twined in and out of the bodies.

They drew back appalled.

"Look at the plan, Tom," Jim said; "you must be wrong." They paused in a narrow passage, and as Earle leaned faint against the wall, he felt the ponderous mass behind him move, and, springing to his feet, the massive stone door swung slowly forward and closed the entrance to the torture-room for ever.

"If that had slipped round when we were in there, and blocked us up with those skeletons," he said, as he wiped his brow, "I should have gone mad."

Jim had looked up from the plan, startled by the sound as it boomed along the corridor when the door crashed to.

"We have nearly reached the end—see," he said, as he handed the plan to Earle, and busied himself tying their last ball of twine to the preceding ones. Earle scanned the plan eagerly—"Yes." In a few minutes they reached the end of the corridor; at the end a door was half open, as dead Singleton had found it. Around them, above them, was solid rock: they had reached the goal of their hopes.

"Wedge the door firmly open, Jim, with the alawanga," or Ceylon crowbar they had brought with them. "It might swing to, as the door of the torture-chamber did." Jim obeyed, and wedged it fast with the crowbar and blocks of loose stone.

They entered the mysterious chamber, and as they gazed round them Jim was about to cheer, when Earle clapped his hand over his mouth. "Hush! remember our escape from death when you fired the revolver; we know not what may happen if we break the silence of this place; and besides, we are in the presence of the mighty dead."

The whole of the walls were covered with mystic patterns in black marble, inlaid on a white surface with such delicacy that it was impossible to find the joints. In the centre of the chamber was a fairy-like structure of white marble, carved with lattice work of marvellous intricacy and beauty. So fine was the carving, so delicate the meshes, that it was inconceivable how it could have been done without breaking the marble into thousands of fragments. Yet it was, and there it stood, lacework frozen to stone. Inside was a sarcophagus of marble, covered with flowers, inlaid with the most valuable gems. Draped round the tomb, inside the marble lacework, were cloths of gold, entirely hiding the tomb from view.

Ranged round the room were "chank" shells, inlaid with gold, and bowls and vases of the most

beautiful workmanship, cut out of solid pieces of agate, lapis lazuli, cornelian, amethyst, and topaz; and even one of malachite from the frozen Russian north, showing how far and wide the commerce and trade of these lost Oriental races must have extended.

Each jar and cup, though not large, was filled to the brim with precious stones. Here a jar shone forth the burning rays of rubies, from another came the translucent blue beams of sapphires, catseyes gleamed dully green in another, bright green emeralds vied with them in proud rivalry from a neighbouring vase.

"Here is wealth enough," Earle said; "no need to disturb the royal dead," and with trembling hands they emptied cup and shell, vase and bowl, of their glittering contents. Some were uncut rough stones, others cut and pierced in Eastern fashion.

They filled their gem belts and bosoms, and then replaced the costly, but now empty, receptacles in the order they found them. After one long, lingering look round them at the still sarcophagus—and as long as they live Earle and Bolitho will remember that solemn scene—they noiselessly left the chamber.

"Close the door, Jim," Earle whispered, and silently taking away the obstructions the door—as if moved by some invisible impulse, and as if its duty were done by allowing the treasures it had guarded to be rifled to make English hearts

and homes happy, and to aid the new owners to spread civilization and progress after they had lain useless there so long—the portal swung silently to its lintels, and, looking at it a moment afterwards, Earle and Bolitho could not even see the fissure where it joined the wall of rock.

Rapidly winding up the guiding string, they retraced their steps. As they did so they found the elephant-headed god with its twenty arms had fallen prone, and lay in shattered fragments on the cavern floor.

They looked at each other and hurried on, and, at first twinkling like a blue star of hope, and ever growing larger and clearer, they again saw the blessed light of heaven.

Once more! Again, as they stood on the ground outside by the heathen gods, who had been powerless to guard their treasure, two English hearts and hands met in a warm congratulatory grip, and unloosing the patient tat pony, they went up the verdure-clad precipice on the other side of the valley of the dead, and reached their camp as the shades of the tropical night fell in.

For a moment they turned as if by a common impulse, and looked at the city of the past. As they did so Earle pressed Bolitho's arm, and trembled as he glanced anxiously round.

"Look," he said, "a tropical storm is coming, and we are here unprotected in the open." As he spoke a black spot rose over the precipice

temple they had left, the cloud shot out inky tentacles, like a Ceylon tarantula feeling for its prey, and in a few seconds the tropical thunderstorm burst, the startled men and frightened animals cowered under the tree, and Tom and Jim watched with straining eyes the lightning playing and dancing amid the ruins of the city as it lit up temple and fane and palace with fantastic illuminations. One vivid flash of forked lightning; and Earle and Bolitho shouted as they saw it quiver over the carved face of the temple they had left. And as its bolt struck full on the gigantic carved god, with its elephant head and monstrous body and arms, and which had stood directly over the entrance, as if guarding it, the mass of carved stone fell forward, as its prototype had done in the cavern, and tons upon tons of the riven rock of the fallen god blocked up the entrance with a hundred feet of ruin. Half blinded by the flash, Jim and Tom reeled back, and—as if that were the end—the storm rapidly rolled away, and a bright blue star appeared in the sky directly over the temple.

"Now as quickly as possible for England," Earle said next morning to Bolitho. "You will be married and returned from your honeymoon with Mary in plenty of time for us all to have our Christmas dinner together." They had carefully arranged and packed the stones in their gem-belts and strong-box, and had arranged that one or the other should never leave the tat pony

that carried the treasure until they reached Colombo.

"We shall not go back the way we came," Earle said; "I had to come that way to follow Singleton's plan step by step. We can now make a short cut to Colombo through Koorowathi and Ratnapoora, where many of these gems were found, and thence it is an easy journey to Colombo."

And pressing homewards without delay, camping only in the midday heat of the sun, and riding all one night by moonlight, and on another by the light of a burning patna jungle, they reached Colombo in safety.

"We will give the ponies to the coolie," Earle said; "he has been very useful, and is anxious to get home."

"Certainly," Jim answered, "and all our clothes and belongings; all we have to do is to get a couple of light suits for the return voyage, and a fresh stock of underclothing."

"Guard the box until I do so," Earle said, for this conversation took place in their bedroom at the Galle Face Hotel, and they never left the box for an instant.

"I have paid him well, and bought all we require. Place that box by that one," he said to the servant of the general store shop where he had made his purchases, and he gave him a rupee. The servant salaamed and withdrew. "The coolie sends whatever is the Tamil equiva-

lent of his love to you and good luck. I have sent this telegram to England: 'From Bolitho and Earle to Tarleton. Perfect success; will be home, via Brindisi and Marseilles, in three weeks.' "

"Bravo!" Jim said. "I shall visit this jolly place one day with Mary."

"Our steamer sails in the morning; let us go on board to-night."

And by midday next day they saw the purple shores of Ceylon sink below the horizon, and a few weeks later looked once more on the lights of London.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE storm that had buffeted the Peninsular and Oriental Company's steamer *Arcot*, as she ploughed her way on the first stage of the voyage to Ceylon and the East with Earle and Bolitho on board, after sweeping over Cornwall and the southern coast, reached London as Cecil Tarleton arrived at the railway terminus at King's Cross. And when the Great Northern mail train steamed slowly into the station and disgorged its passengers on the platform, the wind driving through the draughty station in fitful gusts, and the beating rain pattering on the lofty glass and iron roof, he wondered how Jim and Tom were faring in the Channel that night, as he drove from the station to Henrietta Mansions, Cavendish Square, and interviewed his old host Jeffrey, the proprietor, who welcomed him as an old *habitué* and known to many of his Indian and Colonial guests.

He then despatched a telegram to Mrs. Earle, notifying her of his address for the ensuing week, and requesting that all letters and telegrams should be forwarded to him there.

The next morning he commenced his search for the missing squire of Ritherdons Grange. Scotland Yard was but an easy walk from the

hotel, and he presented his credentials, Avice's letter of authorization, to the chief.

"Of course, Mr. Tarleton, with a gentleman of the position of Squire Gainsborough of Ritherdons missing, you may be sure we have already instituted inquiries, both through the Yorkshire police and here in London on our own account; but we are completely baffled; there is no one to suspect. We have instructed our detectives to watch all the places he used to frequent before his marriage. His mother-in-law closed her house just in time for the crew who used to frequent it to escape us," the chief of police added grimly, "but the men who frequented it are either in London or on the continent. We know them all, and, unknown to them, watch all their movements, but there is no suspicion that they are connected in any way with his disappearance. In fact, we have no clue save one, and that of the slightest and most impalpable nature. Captain Disney Keene, who used to be one of Squire Gainsborough's most frequent associates, has disappeared from the haunts he frequents, but even then he was frequently seen for several days after the burning of Ritherdons Grange and the disappearance of Squire Gainsborough; and we have traced his movements so accurately that he could have had no hand in either; in fact, it is only now he has changed his address, and, from what we know of his ways, he will probably change his address several times during the next

few days in London, so as to put us off his track before he starts another *coup*. We only had him once, and since then the slippery customer has kept out of our nets," the chief continued regretfully, in much the same mournful way that an enthusiastic angler would describe "that twelve-pound jack I can't catch." "We nearly had him for inducing young Tredegar, Lady Tredegar's son, to forge a bill, but that was settled and hushed up somehow; we don't know how, but suspect there was a woman in the case as usual."

Cecil Tarleton said nothing, and determined to keep Avice's secret, and also not to mention the half-burnt letters.

"These are the places Mr. Gainsborough used to frequent," the chief of police said, rising and giving him a list of fast supper clubs, betting clubs, "*et id genus omne*"; "you might look round them for a bit, on the chance of finding him."

Cecil thanked him.

"We will let you know if we hear anything," the Scotland Yard authority said. "Ting!" sounded his handbell, and hardly before Cecil had left the room he was busy with the details of the next case.

Perplexed and sad at heart, Tarleton next visited the London agents of the bankers and solicitors he had seen a short while before. They could give him no information whatever, so the hopes that Cecil had half formed—that Dick had

come to London, and, running short of funds, had applied to them—were dashed to the ground.

Nearly a week had passed; Cecil had visited every likely place, and had done all human forethought could suggest to find his missing friend, but of no avail; Squire Gainsborough had as utterly disappeared as if burning Ritherdons had calcined his very bones to powder.

Disheartened by his unsuccessful search for tidings of the missing squire, he decided to obtain all the information he could against the man who had been his poor friend's cruellest enemy. The latter seemed to be a more hopeful quest than the former. Poor Dick had always been like a fish out of water in London, and, with the exception of the shady society who used to frequent Mrs. Banastre's house, he knew hardly anyone.

He had no other haunts or friends. He might have drifted into any quarter of the town, if he had come there at all, which, Cecil agreed with the London police in thinking, was very unlikely. Captain Disney Keene, however, Dick found an easier quarry. Just at that time it was his fortune to be only too notorious.

"Know anything about him? I should hope I did," said the journalist and man about town who had told Cecil of Dick Gainsborough having become the Squire of Ritherdons, and to whom Cecil went as the best man to get information from. "Why, I wrote the article accusing him of

systematic card-sharping which sent him under."

"Gone under, has he? Then he will be rather a difficult man to find."

"Not a bit of it; he takes his disgrace like a monument; and, although he is no longer to be seen at his clubs, for he has no longer any clubs to be seen at, he is visible enough in such places as are open to the public with money in their pockets. You will be sure to come across him if you go the rounds of the restaurants and places of amusement; though he is hungry and dangerous. Why, I'd take six to four he is in there now," and the journalist pointed towards a large restaurant in Piccadilly Circus, where they were standing talking. "We will go in and see."

"Don't want him to see me with you; if he knows you, that might prejudice him against me, and I want to make his acquaintance."

"You will find him a dangerous friend," said the other, and then he smiled as he noticed a curious expression play across Cecil's face; "and almost as dangerous an enemy; still, no doubt you know how to play your game. Let us go in separately. If he is in the place I will take a whisky and soda, and pretend that we are strangers. You will make him out easily enough; tall, white-faced, with a pointed black moustache."

Cecil followed his friend into an inner bar, where American drinks were sold. "Where the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together." American "pick-me-ups" and cunningly-devised drinks seem to attract the wealthier class of young fools as beer and sugar do wasps.

But the young fools are outnumbered by those who come to prey on them. That comfortably-furnished, well-appointed bar, with its massive chandeliers, cut-glass, and plate; the spruce barman, with a large real diamond in his snowy shirt-front; the luxurious red velvet divans; the five hundred varied, seductively-named drinks, from the lordly "champagne mint cocktail" to the humble "Bourbon rye straight," were only bait. The divan was the haunt of cosmopolitan, well-dressed scoundrelism, and the favourite hunting-ground of some of the most dangerous men of prey in London. Before his friend had ordered his drink, Cecil Tarleton knew he had seen Avice's enemy. He somehow felt sure of the big white-faced man who sat dining at a table near the bar. The whisky and soda was ordered, and as the journalist drank it he, without looking towards Cecil, directed his attention to the man at the table. Then he walked out to muse on the curious life of London, and to speculate languidly over the danger which might or might not accrue to Cecil in the adventure which he seemed to be bent on.

"He will find Keene an awkward customer,

Poor old Tarleton, it would make 'copy' if anything happened to him through Keene," he thought, as he strolled homewards. He knew much about some of the men who, well-dressed and bejewelled, lounged about that bar, for he was one whose mission it was to know much about the seamy side of London life; and he knew that Disney Keene was one of the most dangerous of them.

Cecil, as he drank a sherry and bitters, watched the man at the table. "A dangerous customer—yes, a very dangerous customer, strong physically and mentally," Cecil thought, as he looked into the white, half-handsome face, with its well-cut features and evil, remorseless-looking mouth and hard black eyes, and took in the proportions of the deep chest and long limbs, which he could make out well under well-fitting evening dress-clothes; and he tried to remember if he had seen him before.

There were several spare places at the table where the man sat. Cecil took one of them, and ordered some dinner.

"By-the-bye, waiter, I have no small change, only a note for twenty-five pounds. Can you get change for that for me?" Cecil asked, after he had ordered rather an expensive dinner. The waiter said there would be no difficulty. Cecil could not see any sign in Captain Disney Keene's face that he had heard this or saw the note he produced; and yet, somehow, he felt convinced

that he had. All his life the Captain had taken a collector's interest in all specimens of coin and notes, especially when they were in the possession of other people.

Presently he broke the ice, and, making an inquiry as to some item of news, he began a conversation.

There was no doubt about it; he was a pleasant fellow, and a brilliant conversationalist enough. Somehow the conversation wandered towards gambling and play. Cecil Tarleton had none of the snob's boastfulness about money. But for once in his life he transgressed in this direction. He told wild stories of big bets and losses.

"A fool, not a very young fool, but a fool with at least twenty-four pounds odd about him," thought Captain Disney Keene as he twirled his moustache. Keene had given Cecil a very fair cigar, which the latter praised enthusiastically.

"Come to my chambers, and I will give you a better one. I was going out, but it would bore me now, and sooner smoke. We might pass the time with a little ecarté if you have nothing better to do."

Nothing Cecil would like better, and so the pair made their way to a house in the Shaftesbury Avenue, where, after climbing many steps, they arrived at the door of the top set, inhabited by Captain Disney Keene. "Not a very gorgeous little crib," said the Captain as he opened the door and turned up the light, "but I am not a

home bird. I generally even breakfast at one or the other of my clubs, and am very little here."

Cecil laughed to himself as he thought to himself that the Captain's breakfasts in clubland were just now likely to be few and far between.

The rooms were comfortably furnished enough, but not more so than those inhabited by numbers of retired civilians, half-pay officers, and other lonely gentlemen, with small, independent incomes, who swarm in London. There were two comfortable armchairs, into one of which Cecil sank, and two tables—on the one an old blotting-pad and an inkpot.

"The scoundrel must have sat at that table when he concocted those fiendish letters which darkened poor Dick Gainsborough's reason," was the thought that flashed through Cecil Tarleton's mind. Before he had had no fixed purpose in his pursuit of Keene—only a general notion that he could best serve Avice by throwing himself in the way of her enemy; now his thoughts turned to one idea—that blotting-book.

Cecil began to feel that Keene was watching him, and, anxious not to look at the blotting-book again, he began to examine the photographs on the mantelpiece. There, amongst a lot of brazen-faced, half-clad women, he recognised one of Avice as he had known her some years before. He could not take his glance off it, though he felt the other was staring at him as if he could read his secret.

"Yaas, a pretty face and innocent looking. Curious, however, the older one grows one is as much gone on innocence as one was when one believed in it. Now, if you ask me why that little girl should have the look of it, and the others shouldn't, begad I couldn't tell you, and I know the one as well as the rest; they are all alike, and she is about the worst."

Cecil bit his lips. He had noticed one of the photographs was that of one of the most notorious women in London, and though Keene was strong enough to kill him in a few moments, yet he would dearly have liked to have struck him across the mouth; and it was only the knowledge that he could hurt him most by keeping silence that enabled him to keep cool.

"What will you drink?" said Keene. "I have some good brandy and whisky; that's all my tap up here, but I can get anything you may fancy next door."

"Thanks, very much," Cecil responded.

"I am out of soda-water," Captain Keene said; "glad I thought of it; I'll order half-a-dozen directly."

He had no suspicion whatever with regard to Cecil; in fact, he knew he was a barrister, for while they were dining a wealthy young barrister, whom Keene had long desired to get into his net, had strolled into the bar and nodded to Cecil, whom he knew slightly; and on Keene's mentioning his name, Cecil had replied, care-

lessly, "Yes, a brother barrister of my Inn;" and the barrister had come to Cecil's table and shaken hands with him, mentioning he had not seen him lately, and was he going to dine at mess next night. So Keene had no anxiety at leaving him alone in his chambers.

As soon as Cecil heard his footsteps descending the stairs he seized the blotting pad; a cursory examination showed him he was on the right track, and hurriedly taking out the blotting-pads and all their contents, he replaced the empty covers on the table. He longed to take Avice's photograph from its degrading surroundings, but could not risk raising Keene's suspicions. He had just replaced the empty book by the time that Keene came back into the room with the man carrying the soda-water. He mixed a glass of brandy and soda, which Cecil drank, and then suggested a game of *ecarté*.

"You must think it very odd of me, but I really cannot to-night, an infernal neuralgic pain has come on worse than I have ever had it; it's maddening me; no, it won't go off, I know it of old; you must excuse me, but I must go."

"The deuce you must; it seems to me your neuralgia comes on very suddenly," said Keene, looking at Cecil as if he could hardly make him out; and as he looked Cecil could read the thoughts that were passing through his mind, as to whether he should stun and rob him or not. But, by using all his tact, he got Keene to

imagine that the winning of far larger sums than he had about him was only a matter of time. He repeated that he "must be off," and before Keene had got over his surprise and irresolution he had shaken hands with him, giving a hearty acceptance to the other's invitation to meet him shortly, and, as Keene knew only too well, with all his money in his pocket, and, as Keene did not know, the contents of the blotting book under his waistcoat, he was making the best of his way down the long flight of stone stairs into the street and on to the Temple.

"And now let me see what I have found," said Cecil, as he first shook the contents of the blotting-book. Several notes and scraps of paper fell. The first Cecil judged was in Keene's handwriting. It was the beginning of an unfinished note: "Dear Green,—I am sorry you should be so badly advised as to allege unfair play. You must know the consequences——" Cecil thought he could fill up that story. Other notes and scraps told pretty plainly to a man of the world of the owner of the blotting pad's shady life; but none of them had anything to do with Avice; it was from the blotting paper, not from the scraps of paper between it, that Cecil hoped for some evidence of the plot. As he took up the blotting paper to make a careful examination, he saw a piece of paper on the floor. It was the billhead of an account from the jewellers where the sham diamonds were bought, torn and scribbled over

with figures, as if some calculations had been made on the back of it. Cecil flushed as he put it carefully away; he felt he was on the right track. Then he held the blotting paper up to the glass. On page after page he could make out nothing. Then he came to a page on which he could see that an envelope, directed to R. Gainsborough, Esquire, Ritherdons, had been blotted. He was getting warm. There were some other words on that page, and when he read them he remembered them as sentences that occurred in one of the letters written to Dick Gainsborough.

On another page a letter written in a scrawling hand had been blotted when the ink was wet. Cecil could read the whole letter as clearly as if he had the paper on which it was written before him. It was the cunningly worded note that lured Avice to visit the house in Blank Street.

"Now I have got him," cried Cecil between his teeth, as he read it again and again. Here was proof, positive proof. Proof to him, but he was always sure of Avice's innocence. To the rest of the world, too, if they only knew what he did—that the blotting-paper he held in his hand came from Keene's chambers.

Some days elapsed, and he had learnt nothing further. He had been alone all day, and was feeling one of those unaccountable fits of nervousness and depression which, could we but read aright the occult influences acting on us from a distance, could teach us so much.

"I have enough money to carry me on without either pawning any more of the Gainsborough diamonds at Osborne and Gall's, or touching the money in the safe," he reflected; "and now, in Avice's position, I must be careful; what *is* best to be done?" Again, as he sat there, as the summer's evening gently closed in, he began to feel the unaccountable nervousness and depression he had experienced before, but far more intense—an indefinable something seemed to constantly urge him to go north as speedily as possible.

"My mind is made up," he said, starting to his feet; "I will go north the first thing to-morrow. It is some time since I saw Keene, and I have learnt nothing about Dick. I can feel Avice needs me, and I must ask her wishes about the disposal of the Gainsborough diamonds and the money I hold. I did right in not stopping alone in the chambers without Jim's cheery voice and presence. In the present anxious state of affairs, I should perhaps have gone as mad as poor Dick," and he hurried to Jeffrey's hotel in Cavendish Square.

After a restless and sleepless night, he sat with his untasted breakfast before him.

"A telegram, sir," the waiter said, as he tendered the brown envelope to him on a salver. It was from Mrs. Earle: "Nothing has been heard of the squire; Avice is well. I have no news, but I want you to come at once. Mary will meet you at the station;" and an hour later Cecil was again speeding to Hampton Lovett.

CHAPTER XX.

"WHAT is it, Mary?" he said eagerly, as he saw her waiting for him at the station. She made no reply, but put her finger to her lips for silence. "Come quickly," she whispered, looking round to see no one observed them. "Go across the fields, and meet me by the last house of the village, where the lane begins. It is nothing about Dick," she whispered again, and she hurriedly left the station, while Cecil wonderingly hastened to obey, and, hurrying behind the hedges, he reached the place as she came up.

"We have no time to lose," she said, taking his arm, and he could feel she trembled, but there was a look of resolve on her face. "I can tell you as we walk on this way;" and instead of keeping down the lane, she turned into a byway which led to a leafy copse. "We do not know what new mystery is overshadowing Avice," she said in low tones, "so we thought it best that no one, not even Avice, should know you have come. There may be one, there may be several, in some plot against her; you know what black mystery enshrouds everything. Last night a messenger brought a letter at dusk for Avice; he

asked if Mrs. Gainsborough lived at Upcott's; our servant said 'Yes,' and he vanished in the gloom."

"The very time I felt I was needed here," Tarleton thought. "Go on," he said.

"Avice was well and cheerful when it was handed to her, but she became a changed being as soon as she read it—she trembled and moaned and wandered about the room, wringing her hands, the very embodiment of distress. To all we asked, she would only tell us the letter had nothing to tell her about Dick—that it related to her mother, and we could learn nothing more. Mamma suggested sending for you, but she only moaned and shook her head. No one could help her, she said. All night she tossed and moaned about her mother; even Dick seemed to be forgotten in the incoherent words that poured from her lips.

"This morning, early, another letter came. I knew the bearer by sight; he is supposed to be a poacher at night, and he lives in the town across the moor, and attends race meetings. I know that, for mamma has helped his wife," she added simply. "He handed the letter to me. 'A gentleman at the town give me this, miss,' he said; 'I was to arsk for an arnser.' I took it to Avice. A look of determination came over her face, 'The answer is yes, at seven to-night,' was all she said. I gave the message to the bearer of the letter, and he returned to town across the moor. I had

already taken mamma's telegram to you at the post office in the early morning, and when I saw Avice's stony, despairing grief I was glad to think you would be here.

"Avice turned and clung to me. 'Mary,' she wailed, 'I have to meet a villain; but, bear me witness, it is for my mother's sake I do it.' 'Where and when?' I asked, amazedly. 'In the copse by Hampton Lovett Lane at seven. Oh, heaven! shall I never again have peace in this world?' 'May I come?' I asked. 'No, no,' she said, affrightedly, and I said no more. 'Now, Cecil Tarleton,' Mary Earle continued, as she bent her flashing eyes on him, 'I have read your and Avice's secret, but I know you to be true and loyal; I know her to be pure; keep watch and ward with me and save her from that man, be he whom he may."

"I will," Cecil quietly said, but she looked at his face and was content.

Mary Earle touched him lightly on the arm. "Follow me," she said, and they took up a position that commanded a view of the glade, and a part of the road over the moor as it wound towards Hampton Lovett Lane, and the open copse adjoining it. Within the copse Cecil Tarleton could see Avice Gainsborough standing at the foot of a tree. Her listless attitude as she stood with her hands clasped in front of her was that of one overwhelmed with grief. Her black dress hung in sombre folds about her, and brought out in

radiant and beautiful relief her golden hair. Her pale, lovely, drooping face was half hidden in the folds of a black lace shawl she had thrown over her head, and wrapped loosely round her throat; and black lace edging half hid her hands as they drooped before her; their sole ornament being her wedding ring, the only bit of colour she wore.

"Cecil Tarleton," spoke the grave, sad voice of the girl beside him, "be brave and resolute, we know not what is coming; above all things be patient; will you be guided by me, and not act until I tell you? I know no more than you, but my judgment may, when the time comes, be calmer than yours. When now I say watch and wait, will you wait until I tell you to act?"

This was a time for deeds, not words, and Cecil again simply replied, "I will."

"Look," Mary Earle said solemnly, as she pointed to the moor, "the hour has come and the man."

But neither she nor Cecil Tarleton noticed another figure stealthily creeping, like a red Indian, through the furze and bracken of the moor towards the other side of the glade; a figure that ever and anon fixed its burning eyes on the flashy individual it had watched with tiger-like intensity ever since he had passed round the road by Holgar's Barrow.

A gaunt, tall figure, dressed in a rough game-keeper's suit, his head and neck bare, with un-

trimmed grizzly beard and unkempt hair. A figure that moaned and gibbered to himself, occasionally pausing and bursting out into harsh chuckles, and then again crept stealthily forward, and ever clutching in his strong, bloodstained right hand a long cruel-bladed knife, with a massive gold handle; a figure that had come from a deadly struggle, for there were spots and splashes of blood on him, more than the thorns and brambles which tore his flesh—for the figure was insensible to pain—could have caused. Ever nearer the ghastly figure crept, and sidled and writhed to keep out of sight of the man on the road until he reached the copse. Then with a bound he leapt among the trees and hid behind one that gave him a full view and hearing of Avice and the wayfarer as they met. But for all they knew of his presence, he might have been a disembodied spirit from the other world.

"What can that villain want with Avice?" Mary Earle whispered to Cecil.

"Be silent, and wait!" Cecil muttered; "I know him," as the jaunty, debonnaire-looking man appeared round the road as it led from the town across the moor to the lane and copse.

"Like a good soldier, reconnoitred the positions yesterday, and made arrangements accordingly. A pretty spot for a wordy war with a fair foe; but I'll have her a tamed captive before our little interview is over, or I am much mistaken. Pretty little black and tan vixen, I thought that strategy

about her mother would fetch her here, although how she could care for the old cat beats me. Curse her, I love her more than ever," he said, viciously, to himself, as he gnawed the ends of his long black moustache, and his black, bold-looking eyes glittered ominously. "I know her; meek as she looks now, there's not a greater little spitfire when she's roused."

"Charmed to see you, Avice. I have come to your help. You want someone just now who is a little wiser and stronger than yourself to look after your affairs," Keene said as he took off his hat with a half insolent bow; but the shiver of disgust that passed over Avice made his face lower and look evil.

"My name is Mrs. Gainsborough," she answered.

"Ah! yes; and perhaps just now a better name than Banastre, but one which might have become a little blurred if everyone knew all that you and I do."

"You wrote me you had urgent messages from my mother. I can help her no more. What does she want? I have nothing."

"Ah! You know her ladyship; but she can keep, as they say. No, Avice; I have come to talk about your own pretty little self. Avice, you know I have loved you, and I never loved you more than now, though soft-brained Dick has been fool enough to burn his place and his fortune because you had been a little—what shall

we call it, fast, eh?" A piteous cry broke from Avice's lips. Cecil's veins grew like knotted cords on his forehead, but Mary Earle pressed him firmly on the arm.

"What is there to cry about? The madman is dead; of course he is dead. You are free. He didn't care for you; I worship you. And you love me, Avice, my dear, and then you will begin to live. Come away with me, it is better than having to go back to your mother," he added. Avice looked round her despairingly.

"You shall come," he continued, "I know all about your troubles. That fool Dick has left no will. I have heard how he destroyed all the wine in the cellars; mad fool to waste good liquor," the captain contemptuously went on, "he burnt all he had that you should not have anything. Yes," he sneered, as Avice started and looked fixedly at him, "I was in his confidence, you know, but I'll make it all up to you, my dear," he hastened to say, seeing that in his jubilation at having won, as he thought, so much quicker and easier a victory than he had anticipated, he was letting her know more than he intended, and arousing her suspicions. "Now, Avice, one kiss to seal our love," and he leaned forward to seize her.

Avice sprang away from his grasp, while the clear voice of Mary Earle rang out: "Now, Cecil Tarleton," and he sprang forward like an arrow from a bow.

Disney Keene seemed disconcerted for a second,

as he stared at Cecil and recognised him. Then an insolent look came into his face. "So you are her champion, the sneak who gets into gentlemen's chambers by false pretences and steals their papers; and so she has a little weakness for you, has she? Well, perhaps she is worthy of you; only *I* want her, so you had better clear away, and leave me and her alone," he said, and he squared his shoulders and looked menacingly at Cecil's slight figure.

"Cecil! what can bring you here?" and Avice wrung her hands in an agony of dread. "Go away; he can kill you. He has killed men, I know," she implored.

"Do you hear? You clear out sharp, or your mother wouldn't know you in five minutes," snarled the captain, clenching his fists.

Again came Mary Earle's ringing voice. "If Cecil Tarleton could not have been here to protect Avice, *I* should have been; it is allowable to kill noxious beasts," and a revolver gleamed in her hand. The captain cowered before the steady eye and shining barrel. "Yes, Avice," growled Keene, "just think over things before you choose between me and that milk-and-water sneak. I am strong, and can fight for you against society if I am your friend; and I can ruin you, and tear away every scrap of reputation you have left, if I am your enemy."

"I am innocent, and am not afraid of such a man as you are," said Avice.

"Innocent! Bah! The world won't believe you innocent; it will want a stronger case than you can make out for you to make people doubt as to your guilt. I can bring the man who was with Dick Gainsborough when he watched you that day in Chelsea. *I* know how you wore diamonds your lovers gave you. I know your life. Innocent! No, don't talk that nonsense any longer; you have lost the little reputation Mrs. Banastre's daughter ever had; and what is innocence worth when reputation is gone?—devilish little," and Keene laughed softly to himself. "No, if you choose this penniless cur, the time will come when you won't have a friend in the world, and your husband and your children, if you have any, shrink from the woman whose vile life drove Dick Gainsborough mad."

"You infernal villain!" shouted Cecil, as he tore the imitation diamond necklace from his breast pocket, where it had reposed night and day while he had tried to penetrate the mystery connected with it; "this was part of your devilish plot to set poor Gainsborough against his wife," and he hurled the necklace in the captain's face, where it left a livid mark.

The Captain stooped and picked it up as it lay glittering on the sward. "Bah! your virtuous indignation in defence of your two mistresses' reputation won't do." Captain Disney Keene had never been nearer death than he was then, as Mary Earle gripped the glittering revolver,

and far better would it have been for him if he had died then and there.

Avice clung to Cecil. "Let him go away!" she implored.

"We will settle scores some day, my fine fellow," said the Captain, as a scowl deepened on his brow. "When you can't take shelter under cover of a petticoat with a pistol, when there are no witnesses by, and I can smash you quietly. Stay, though I could kill you as easily as I could kill a rat if I waited my time, and I can make my pretty Avice's reputation one which no lost woman in the street would pick up, yet I will come down from my position and meet you man to man with pistols. See, Avice, what a cur it is; he has a chance of avenging all your wrongs, and ridding you of an enemy if you are so silly as to think me one, and he funks it. If you are not a coward you know where to find me."

"No, no, Cecil, he has killed men in duels; they are murders; don't fight him, or I shall lose my brave friend." Avice sobbed.

But Cecil was without fear in his composition, and a match for any ordinary man, though he would have had no chance in a physical struggle with the brawny Hercules who was taunting him with a mocking sneer, and he eagerly accepted the challenge, and named his friend the journalist as his second to act for him.

Keene's eyes glittered with triumphant malice. "I owe him a debt, too, as you know. I'll kill

you, my two carrion birds, with one stone. The sooner we start for Belgium the better," and he named a notorious owner of racehorses and another man of equally equivocal reputation as his two friends.

"You shall hear from me directly I have made the arrangements," Cecil replied contemptuously.

"*Au revoir*, Avice, my dear; you will have changed your mind when I next see you," and Captain Keene laughed harshly as he turned on his heel.

"I thought he would meet me, and it will be simpler to put a bullet in him and get rid of him in a duel on the sand dunes of Ostend quietly. I'll settle that journalist afterwards; it is better than doing for him in any other way. I never could make out where that fool Dick stowed the swag. I thought I should have collared it all, but I only got that one lot that night when I drove across the moor for it and that fool of a servant woman came back. I think that frightened Dick; I only made a few hundred out of the things I was taking care of. After that it was the only thing I could never get out of him, but after the way he destroyed his place and the wines I expect the mad fool either destroyed it or put it somewhere where his soft brain couldn't remember. How I used to roar with laughter when I wrote those letters, and had him consult me afterwards; and the cream of the joke was I paid for these diamonds

out of what I made from the things I brought away from Ritherdons. These diamonds will come in handy for Lottie ; she won't want to sell them until I am tired of her ; she won't know their value. And as for Avice, I'll get her yet, silly little fool, when I have killed that cursed meddling whelp. Dick's either been taken up as a wandering lunatic or bolted, or, what is far more likely, killed himself in burning Ritherdons," he chuckled to himself as he passed along the road which wound round to the cross-roads where Holgar's Barrow stood in its grim, grey, silent sombreness.

CHAPTER XXI.

WHILE Disney Keene had been talking to Avice, the gaunt, blood-stained man behind the tree and brushwood had ever listened eagerly, clasping his long knife to his heart, and ever and anon plucking at its handle with nervous fingers until the tips were raw and bleeding and the blood streamed down. As he plucked at the handle the strong gold wire that was wrapped round the long haft became loosened, and about two inches of the gold wire hung down, and he moaned and gibbered to himself in silence, while not a twig snapped, not a leaf rustled to reveal his lair.

When Cecil Tarleton leapt from the leafy covert where he had been concealed, with Mary Earle, to protect Avice, a storm of baffled rage and disappointment swept over the gibbering figure's scarcely human features, and he cowered and beat his breast in the same way a gorilla does when enraged and yet alarmed. For he dimly recognised a superior mental force, as pitiful gleams of struggling thought flitted over his face, and for a moment dimmed the fierce blaze in the burning eyes. Then he gnashed his teeth and

cowered back, and again began fondling his knife, and patiently waited and watched. At last he saw the captain turn towards the moor and walk along the road leading to Holgar's Barrow; then he thrust his knife into his mouth and clawed his cheeks and shoulders, shaking from side to side in a paroxysm of frenzied, silent joy. Then he crept slowly and stealthily into the bracken of the moor. The recollection of the existence of the other three was completely blotted out from his darkened brain. The man—the brain—was dead, only the animal—the instinct—remained. He crept rapidly through the furze and heather towards Holgar's Barrow, ever and anon peering above the bushes at Keene, who walked leisurely along the winding road, and, pausing for a moment, pulled out a cigar-case and, carefully selecting a cigar, lit it. And the man-animal that was gliding after him saw him do so, watched him for a moment with ape-like puzzled curiosity as he saw the flame of the match; then for a moment a gleam of half sense swept over his face, and, feeling in his pockets, he pulled out a box of matches and a pipe. Then the gleam of the bit of gold wire hanging from the handle of the knife caught his eye. The captain had paused for a moment, and was vigorously smoking. A sudden thought seemed to seize the crouching figure, and he rapidly unwound the gold wire from the long handle of the knife. The iron knife, although the blade was as keen as if it had

been forged of the best steel, was of immense age; and as he rapidly unwound the tough gold wire until he had uncoiled some three feet of it which had covered the long handle, and rapidly recoiled it round its left arm, a jade haft appeared, covered with the mystic signs of the Gnostics and Druid worshippers of Osiris and Baal. Then, grasping the firm jade handle with his gluey, bloodstained fingers, he hurried on to the walls of Holgar's Barrow. There, with a grating chuckle, he hid behind a boulder, and crouched and waited for his prey. He had not long to wait. The sun had gone down, and again a lowering darkness had spread its gloomy pall over Ritherdons Moor and Holgar's Barrow. Keene hurried on, and paused for a moment at the crossway where suicides had been buried and murderers had swung rattling in their chains from their creaking gibbets. He heard a rustling in the heather as a blood-splashed form sprang high in the air, the long gold wire, glittering like an ancient Briton's torque, wound round and round its left arm, its gleaming knife raised aloft to slay. As Disney Keene turned, his eyes met the burning orbs of the figure.

"Dick Gainsborough!" he yelled, but a crashing blow on the forehead from the heavy-hilted sacrificial knife felled him senseless to the earth. The madman mopped, and mowed, and capered, and danced around his prostrate foe until after a second or two Keene moved uneasily and at-

tempted to rise. Quick as thought the madman threw himself on him, and, tossing him over as if he were a feather, rapidly unwound the gold wire from his arm, and bound the prostrate captain's hands behind his back. As the tough gold wire cut deeply into the flesh, the captain broke into savage oaths and attempted to rise. About half the wire had been used, and with one wrench, with his madman's strength, Squire Gainsborough snapped it in two, leaving about half still on his arm. But the strength of ten men could not have snapped the cutting ligature round Keene's wrists. As he sat up and glared at the mad squire, a shriek of dread horror came from his lips, and he started to his feet and began staggeringly to run.

Dick watched him for a moment, like a tiger playing with its victim, and then with one bound was again on him. Disney Keene fell heavily on the ground under the shadow of Holgar's Barrow. Twice the sacrificial knife gleamed aloft, two horrible yells followed, and two human eyes lay on the dry heather and bracken, glaring up at the black sky, while a mutilated body quivered, and moaned, and rolled over on the ground, and the mad avenger swayed to and fro with joyless laughter. A tiny stream of smoke, rising in the still night air from the cigar Disney Keene had dropped, next attracted Gainsborough's attention, and again a wave of puzzled thought passed across his face,

and he looked up at the gloomy Pagan temple towering above him. He thrust his hand in his pocket and brought out the pipe and matches, and idly taking one out, he lit it, and watched with pleased, childish curiosity the bright flame. Again he chuckled, and, stooping down, he twisted the remainder of the gold wire round his moaning victim's ankles, and throwing his helpless form over his shoulder, he entered the inner chamber of Holgar's Barrow. An affrighted hush seemed to come over nature as he placed the writhing body in the hollow of the high altar, and stood looking at it, but there was no speculation in those viewless orbs.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE mad squire of Ritherdons Grange stood for several minutes looking at the writhing, sightless form of Captain Disney Keene, *alias* Kemp the forger, *alias* Yankee Bill, as he lay in the hollow of the high altar. As he did so the glitter of the big diamond in the pin he was wearing caught his eye, and a look of childish inquiry and puzzled recollection passed over his face as he took it in his hand, but as he looked at it a gleam of reminiscence seemed to force its way through the mental clouds that overshadowed his brain, and with a fierce growl he hurled the pin away, and began to search Captain Disney Keene's pockets. Hurriedly collecting the contents—watch, chain, money, cigar-case, and the other usual contents of a man's pockets—he piled them on the broad slab of stone where, in ages gone by, the offerings of the Picts had been placed to propitiate the Pagan gods of Britain. Finally, in an inner pocket, he came to the imitation diamond necklace. A loud howl like a wild beast's broke from mad Dick Gainsborough when he recognised its glittering snaky folds, and, seizing the ancient sacrificial knife, he hurled himself on Captain

Disney Keene's quivering form, and ripped off his clothes with the keen blade. In a short while a torn heap of rags lay on the stony floor of Holgar's Barrow, and Keene lay there a naked victim. Stooping down with the blaze of madness in his eyes, Gainsborough lifted and placed two long ponderous stones crossways over the quivering body, as it lay in the hollow of the altar—one across its chest and the other across its legs—which were firmly pinioned, like the arms, by the gold wire; and then, hurrying to and fro, he brought in large armfuls of bracken and heather, dry as tinder after the long summer's drought, and piled it high over the naked body from feet to neck. Then, taking the box of matches from his pocket, he set fire to the pile in every direction until the matches were exhausted. As the fire burnt fiercely up, the shrieks of the burning captain re-echoed through Holgar's Barrow and wide over the adjoining moor of Ritherdons, while the mad squire capered and danced round his dying enemy. Catching sight of the little piled-up heap of valuables, amongst them the glittering necklace, he took Disney Keene's cigar-case, and opening it, lit a cigar at his burning body and smoked it, as he dropped torn clothes, flashy ornaments—all, on the glowing fire. At last he came to the necklace, and, with a madman's strength, he fastened it round his victim's neck. As the diamonds sank deep into his throat and flesh, Disney Keene's face, dis-

torted with pain, now turned purple, his huge body heaved convulsively, and then merciful suffocation relieved his spirit of its tortured earthly tenement.

Mad Dick Gainsborough smoked calmly on. The fumes of tobacco always soothed him, and he sat looking at the blazing pile which was fiercely devouring his slain enemy's spirit-saturated body with greedy tongues of fire. The fire burnt on hour after hour, and once more, after a lapse of two thousand years, the high altar of the great priests of Baal glowed with the heat of burning human sacrifice; and once more human sacrificial blood flowed down the runnels and rivulets, deeply carved in the stone, and plashed on the floor of Holgar's Barrow, as the nineteenth century descendant of those Druids who had worshipped there avenged the wrong done him, and the extinction of his and their house, at the hands of a murderer, a slanderer, and a villain, a stranger from beyond the seas. Dick Gainsborough smoked on, taking cigar after cigar from his dead enemy's cigar-case until it was empty, and then dropped it, the last relic of his foe's existence, on the red-hot stones, where it shrivelled and writhed and burnt, as its owner had done, into calcined ashes.

Hour after hour sped on, and the mad squire still sat by the glowing ashes until the grey dawn began to break over Ritherdons Moor and Holgar's Barrow. What then passed through

Squire Gainsborough's darkened brain will never be known; but leaping up with a wild stare at the smouldering sacrificial fire, and the skull of the dead enemy of the house of Gainsborough, he seized the Druid's knife as it gleamed on the ledge before him, and, with his strong right arm, thrust it to the hilt in his heart; and at the foot of the Pagan altar of his ancestors, Gainsborough of Ritherdons fell dead. His freed, unclouded soul went forth to meet the dawn, and after a brief tarry in the neighbourhood of its earthly tenement, he swept outwards with the tide from time into eternity, his face shining with untroubled peace.

And as the grey dawn deepened into rose, the bracken and heather on Ritherdons Moor bowed towards the rising sun. And the early morning "ringing of the heath," sounding like an Æolian harp as the deep-sweeping wind sought out the secrets of the Moor, sang the Squire of Ritherdons' peaceful requiem.

CHAPTER XXIII.

Mary Earle quietly handed Cecil Tarleton the revolver as Captain Disney Keene, *alias* Yankee Bill, left the glade, and tenderly stooped over Avice's fainting form as she lay on the soft grass, and she applied a scent-bottle to her nostrils and chafed her hands and brow.

A tinge of colour returned to Avice's cheek, and Cecil Tarleton tenderly lifted her, and they reached peaceful Upcott's Cottage as the fierce scene was being enacted at Holgar's Barrow. The night sped on, and there was earnest consultation in Mrs. Earle's pretty sitting-room.

"I will not leave this place," Avice firmly declared in response to their united entreaties, "until I have found my loved lost husband. He cannot have gone to London. My duty is here." And even as she spoke a low knock sounded at the entrance, and as the ladies glanced affrightedly at each other, Cecil quietly took up Mary Earle's revolver and went to the hall door.

The sight that met his eye startled for a moment even his iron nerves. The old servant he had known at Cambridge, and last seen at his cottage on the confines of Ritherdons Moor, tottered in.

His sobbing wife followed him. While Cecil hastily placed him in a chair, he beckoned to his wife to go into the room where the ladies were.

"Don't let the ladies come here," he said, and she curtseyed and closed the door of the sitting-room as she entered.

"Gracious heavens, man! what is it?" Cecil said, appalled. The old servitor's right arm was broken, and had been bandaged with improvised splints, while more bandages had been hastily wrapped round gaping wounds in his head.

"Sir, I did it for the best," he feebly moaned. "I must see Madam Gainsborough, my mistress."

"I am acting for her; tell me at once what has happened," Cecil said, as he half carried, half helped, him into the dining room and gave him brandy.

"Sir, I did it for the best," he wailed again, "I never knew my master was mad anew that night, he spoke so calm and peaceful like; and, as he had afore, he told me to go and visit my son, as he and Madam Gainsborough were going to dine here with Mrs. Earle; 'twas not till I saw the glare of burning Ritherdons Grange I guessed what had happened. I hurried across the moor and I saw the squire in his evening dress, holloring and dancing round Holgar's Barrow; the fighting part of his madness had left him, and I knew how to manage him. We had a bit of a struggle."

Cecil remembered the white tie and diamond stud Jim and Tom had found. "Go on," he said.

"Well, sir, I coaxed him and got him to my cottage on the moor, and the next day he was in a raging brain fever. I could not tell anyone; there was a detective called, but I put him on a false scent. I hoped my dear master would recover in his right mind as he had done before. I dressed him in my gamekeeper's suit when he got better, and he had all he could desire. My wife used to get all he fancied at the town across the moor. And he was quiet, and did all I wished; we used to smoke together," and the old servant cried like a little child, "and I hoped to send for madame, my mistress, and give him to her in his right mind. I knew from when he was at the asylum strange faces excited him; and I knew latterly, I know not how, he had taken to hating my good mistress, who is pure as the day. All was going well. My wife had gone to Hampton Lovett village for some things when we saw that wicked Captain Disney Keene crossing the moor to Hampton Lovett Lane. Sir," continued the faithful old retainer earnestly, "that man was the evil spirit of the house of Gainsborough, I know. When my master saw him coming, his madness again blazed forth; he seemed to see the past clear before him, and he was going to rush across the moor to kill him. Sir, I am old but strong, but I was a child in his hands. I struggled long

with him, we fought up and down; I even got him at one time into our sitting-room, but he had the strength of madness on him. When I came to my senses my wailing wife was bathing my head and tying up my broken arm. He had beaten me down, me who would have given my life for him, and taken the old knife with him I had got from him at Holgar's Barrow that night, and he is gone I know not where." And the tears coursed down the old retainer's weather-beaten cheeks.

With many a sob and tear his wife had told the trembling ladies the same story, and full of pity and sympathy, and heavenly forgiveness on Avice's part, for she knew the faithful old servant had done his best for his loved master and herself, they busied themselves as kindly nurses. And after the old couple had been comfortably placed in the best spare room, Cecil announced his intention of guarding the house all night, revolver in hand. This proceeding was so obviously necessary that Mrs. Earle at once signified her approval, and Tarleton was left alone after all access to the house had been securely barred. Hour after hour sped on as he sat there, revolver in hand, lost in sad thought, but keeping vigilant watch and ward. The door softly opened, and he sprang to his feet.

"Avice!" he said.

"I cannot rest; my duty is here, to watch with you for my husband," she said. "I cannot

bear to think he might come for me, and not to be ready to receive him with the love and comfort of a wife."

Cecil silently placed a comfortable arm-chair for her, and arranged the wrappers round her, as he had done in the garden the first time he saw her after he had played cards with her mad husband, the stakes her life.

Neither spoke. Avice sat resting her chin on her hand as she absently gazed into the wood fire that glowed on the hearth, sending occasional fitful gleams of light about the room, and momentarily lighting up the ornaments and pictures and her golden hair, only to relapse again into deeper gloom. Cecil sat patient, grave, and silent, ever grasping the revolver in his hand.

"Avice," he said, after about an hour had passed in solemn silence, "the day is breaking," for he could see a faint glimmering of dawn above the tree tops and the shutters that barred the lower part of the windows.

She turned slowly from her seat by the fire and wistfully looked at him.

"I have been thinking what is best to be done. Your husband, after what your old retainer told us to-night, is alive." Avice bowed her head. "It will not be safe for you to be here alone, and especially with that villain about, Kemp the Forger, for that is the name I have known him by when I saw him in the dock of the Old Bailey. You have only known him as Captain Disney

Keene." Avice shuddered, but did not reply. "Now, dear Avice, with the early day I shall see Mrs. Sykes's son at the 'Saracen's Head.' He shall stay here with stalwart selected comrades to protect Upcott's cottage and its inmates. I shall take the first train to London, go to the Chancery Lane Safe Deposit Company, where the balance of the money and the Gainsborough diamonds are. I *must* go there, for only the depositors who have their keys can obtain access to the strong-rooms. I shall raise all the money I can, and then return in the afternoon and stay until we have found your lost husband."

Avice bowed her head in silent assent.

The grey dawn crept slowly into the room, and with it a solemn supernatural influence; without speaking both Avice and Cecil shivered, and she rose and sat beside him on the couch, and placed her hand in his. Slowly the feeling deepened, in the innate consciousness of both, that a loved one was struggling in the throes of dissolution. At the end of the room a shimmering impalpable cloud appeared. Gradually it took the misty semblance of a human form; then, darkly at first, then more clearly and defined, a face appeared. No need for them to whisper whose it was. Once more the face of Squire Gainsborough, of Ritherdons Hall; bright, shining, clothed, in its right mind, looked lovingly on them. The misty arms seemed raised aloft, as if in the act of blessing them; a heavenly peace

and content seemed to light it up, and it slowly vanished.

"My beloved husband is dead, I feel it," Avice said, awestruck. "He died in his right mind. Heaven is merciful."

Cecil made no reply; he, too, knew they had been visited by a spirit of the unknown world.

"He blessed us," Avice whispered, turning to Cecil. He bowed his head in mute acquiescence.

How long they sat silent in solitary communion with their thoughts they will never know. At last the outside signs of waking day, the carolling of the birds, the cock's shrill clarion, and the busy stir of animal life, warned them their vigil was over. Cecil rose and opened the door, and, pale as a ghost herself, Avice swept silently to her room.

Cecil rose and undid bars and bolts, and locks, and the fresh, pure air of early morning whispered around him, laden with the fresh smell of earth and the scents of dew-laden flowers.

"No need of bolts and bars," he thought. "Gainsborough has passed away in the night, his spirit has swept out with the tide."

Without bidding farewell to the inmates of Upcott's Cottage, he stepped softly forth into the dawn, and soon reached the "Saracen's Head." A few brief words of explanation to Mrs. Sykes and her son and servants, who were already astir, that Squire Gainsborough had been lying at his old retainer's cottage ill of brain fever, and had yesterday escaped, enlisted all their ready sym-

pathy, and her son, accompanied by his sturdy labourers, cheerfully volunteered to remain at Upcott's Cottage until his return. They bore a letter from him to Mary Earle: "The spirit of the dead came to Avice and me in the night. I return from London this evening, not to leave again until the end."

The stalwart military attendants at the Chancery Lane Safe Deposit Company, at 61, Chancery Lane, saluted Cecil Tarleton, as he stopped at the steel and iron gates. The noonday tide of traffic surged to and fro up and down Chancery Lane, the dull monotonous roar of London sounded like the hum of a busy hive, as Cecil entered the doors and went down to the silent strong-rooms and corridors. There all was still as the grave. Gravely he produced his evidences that he was the renter of a safe, and the silent attendant bowed and produced the master keys. First, Tarleton unlocked his safe, then the attendant and the Secretary unlocked the other wards, and Cecil withdrew the sparkling Gainsborough diamonds and the specie he had stored away. The Secretary and head attendant looked impassively on, and gravely re-locked the safe, and the Secretary withdrew.

As Cecil walked thoughtfully along the gloomy corridor—with its piled-up wealth heaped up in every strong-room round him—again, suddenly he felt he was in the presence of the dead . . . Again he felt he was *en rapport* with a spirit of the

unseen world. He looked hastily up and around him. The military attendant, with disciplined respect, was marching behind him. He paused and stopped. The attendant, behind him halted, and his heels clicked as they met together at attention. His duty simply was to return to the strong-room they had left, should the renter desire, or simply to wait his convenience before he went on; he might be momentarily looking over his valuables to decide what he, the renter, would do. So, with military precision, he halted.

Cecil looked down the steel corridor, there in front of him again shone the impalpable misty cloud; indistinguishable in the gloom at first, it rapidly condensed, and took the shape of a human form, and again Cecil saw the face of Squire Gainsborough, of Ritherdons. Dick's face shone with a pure white light; no longer the blaze of madness shone in those eyes, but a love-light of wistful tenderness; as Cecil Tarleton's met their gaze they gradually turned to one of entreaty, and the shadowy arm seemed to beckon. Again it looked at Cecil, and again beckoned and pointed with its arm to the massive steel and iron door it stood by. Cecil darted forward, the figure grew radiant with luminous light, and smiled—the world of peace and happiness that was in that smile!—and disappeared in the door, as if absorbed into the massive cold steel and hammered iron.

"Safe three hundred and thirty-three. Whose

safe is this?" Cecil excitedly asked the official on guard.

"I do not know, sir; and if did I could not tell you," was the grave rebuke.

"Safe three hundred and thirty-three; I shall know it amongst all here," Cecil said to himself.

"You must not ask me any questions unless connected with your own business with our institution," was the grave reply of the secretary to his anxious questioning, and Cecil knew he was right.

He then walked down Chancery Lane, and, with the money he had, found he had a large sum in hand after he had pledged the remainder of the Gainsborough diamonds. "I shall stay at the 'Saracen's Head' until we learn the end. Surely, surely," Cecil thought, "it is not far distant now."

CHAPTER XXIV.

When the searchers, who had scattered far and wide from the village of Hampton Lovett a few hours later, as soon as the news reached them from Upcott's Cottage that the loved squire was still alive, though still missing, reached Holgar's Barrow, they found in the silent fane the blackened skull of Captain Disney Keene, the diamond necklace gleaming in ghastly mockery round its throat, a mass of calcined bones, and a sluggish pool of blood in the hollow of the Druids' altar. As they raised the body of the dead squire, the old retainer, who had insisted on joining in the search, saw how his hair had turned grey in that single night, and noted the look of rest that had come over his careworn dead face.

In mournful procession they bore Dick Gainsborough to Upcott's Cottage—the one place where he had ever found peaceful welcome when alive—and messengers on horseback scoured the county round and hastily summoned officials and notabilities. An inquest was held, the verdict was given, a resolution of condolence with and sympathy for Madam Gainsborough was passed; and Richard Gainsborough, the last of his race,

lay in peaceful Hampton Lovett Church amid the tombs of his long line of ancestors. And the remains of Captain Disney Keene rested in the quiet churchyard beside him.

"This was all we found on the body of my master, Madam," the old servant, who had been the chief witness at the inquest, said as he respectfully held out his hand. It was but a simple gold chain, with a plain gold locket attached, containing a portrait of Avice and a lock of her hair, with a key attached to the chain next the locket. "The key," he continued, "was also fastened to the chain when we took it from his neck." And Avice took them in her trembling fingers and placed them next her heart.

When Cecil Tarleton arrived in Hampton Lovett the night of the discovery in Holgar's Barrow, and learned that the Squire of Ritherdons was lying dead at Upcott's Cottage, he would not venture to disturb Avice, and left her alone with her beloved dead; but at the earnest request of Mrs. Earle, who wrote to him at the "Saracen's Head," in her position as hostess of Madam Gainsborough, the widow of Squire Gainsborough of Ritherdons Grange, he acted as representative of the ladies of Upcott's Cottage in the pressure of events that followed. And it was not until several days after the inquest on the bodies found at Holgar's Barrow, and their interment in the old ivy-covered church of

Hampton Lovett and its leafy churchyard, that he received a note from Mrs. Earle summoning him to Upcott's Cottage.

Long and earnestly had the two widowed ladies talked the night before, and they had formed a pathetic but lovely picture as they sat together. The elder lady, with her kindly, loving face, fragile and careworn with the grief chastened by the widowhood of years, her beautiful silver-haired head bent down in loving contact with the golden locks that clustered under Avice's widow's cap, while the scented wood fire in Mrs. Earle's room lit up the mingled silver and gold as the elder matron soothed and caressed the younger.

"You have been a mother, indeed, to me," Avice had said, with loving gratitude. "Whatever you advise me to do, I will."

"You will have my advice, dear love, when the time comes, and I think it is not far off," the elder lady had replied, "when it will be wanted; and I pray God that I may advise you aright," she added solemnly. "Go now, my dear, to bed; our conversation has given me much to think about; to-morrow you must see your true friend, Cecil Tarleton."

Avice stooped down and kissed her aged friend's smooth, pure brow, and went thoughtfully to her room.

"Mary, my love, come and help me to make a wreath of flowers," Mrs. Earle said next day,

after Cecil had been received with affectionate welcome; and he and Avice were left alone.

For some minutes neither spoke—their minds were full and awe-stricken with the thoughts that surged and thronged through the minds of both. Then Avice spoke: "From what they tell me, my husband must have died about the time the dawn was breaking."

Cecil started, and their eyes met. He knew of what, like himself, she was thinking. "The day was just breaking when we saw him," he said. Avice looked at him and bowed her head.

"Avice," he said, earnestly, as he came to where she sat, and took her hand in his, "I believe, as sure as there is a heaven above us, that he came to us and blessed us. Avice, I have seen him since."

She turned her deep blue eyes inquiringly on him, as if she would read his very soul, but she saw nothing but candour and truth in the depth of those honest eyes. And she slowly drooped her own until the long eyelashes rested on her pale cheek, and a tear trickled slowly down.

"Avice, dear, you have told me all you know," he said, gently; "is there anything further you can tell me, so that I can help you? but first, dear, to get done with it, here is two thousand pounds, part of the proceeds of the Gainsborough diamonds; will you bank it over the Moor?"

"I *could* not pass dreadful Holgar's Barrow," she moaned. "Never will I wear diamonds or

cross Ritherdons Moor again," and she trembled convulsively.

"I will bank it for you at Dick's banker's London branch, so that need not trouble you, dear one," Cecil said, anxiously.

"Can you tell me nothing further—can you give me no clue where poor Dick's fortune is gone? Surely it cannot have dissolved into smoke and sparks in the flames of burning Ritherdons!"

"I have nothing whatever," she said; "no clue, nothing left, except this locket and chain I gave him," and she unfastened it from round her neck and showed it to him; "and this key—you see where it was fastened to the necklace by him."

Cecil started and trembled as he took the gold necklace in his hands and examined the key. Then he took the key of his strong box in the Chancery Lane Safe Deposit Company.

"Avice," he said, excitedly, as he looked at the intricate wards and graven work of the keys, "I will tell you when and where I saw Dick;" and he told her how he thought he had seen him in the gloomy metal corridor, and how he had dashed forward, and Dick's form had appeared to be slowly absorbed into the massive steel and iron door of strong room number three hundred and thirty-three, while it had ever turned on him its wistful, beseeching eyes.

"I have barely touched the fifty pounds you brought me," Avice said; "two thousand pounds

would be all I should ever want in this world, but I will do all you tell me."

"I will go back at once," he replied, "and make every inquiry. First, I will draw up the necessary authorities for you to sign; go, dear one, to Mary and her mother, and tell them all I have said, and then ask Mrs. Earle to come to me."

Like an obedient little child, Avice rose and left the room, while with practised legal skill, Cecil prepared all necessary documents; Mrs. Earle came in and looked scrutinizingly at him. In a few brief words he explained everything to her, and asked her to see to all accounts for Avice; and she sealed her approval of his conduct with a mother's kiss on his brow.

"Avice," he called, "sign here and here;" she obeyed.

"Now, dear Mrs. Earle, your signature as a witness;" she signed in silence, and Cecil took the papers.

The door opened, and Mary Earle came in; in her hands was a pure white wreath of the loveliest summer flowers.

"Take this wreath, my dear children," sweet Mrs. Earle said, "and go to Hampton Lovett Church and lay them on Dick's grave. I would not bid you do so did I not know you have been tried and not found wanting." And after they had stood by the grave, Avice gave both her hands to Cecil, and bade him a loving farewell.

Cecil reached the steel portals of the Chancery Lane Safe Deposit Institution, and again he questioned the secretary; but it was not until he had gone to his chambers and brought a photograph which Dick Gainsborough had given him at Cambridge, and shown his signed and witnessed credentials, would that rightly reticent official guardedly state that the original of the photograph had a strong room in the Institution.

But Cecil Tarleton's keen legal brain was active, and, without delay, he took all the necessary steps; and a short while afterwards Madam Gainsborough, widow of the late Squire Gainsborough, of Ritherdons Grange, the centre of a little group, comprised of Mrs. Earle and her daughter, the grave secretary, and the silent official, tremblingly handed the key that had been round her dead husband's neck to Cecil Tarleton, her accredited adviser and trusted friend. Cecil inserted the key in the lock. "At and by the wish of Mrs. Gainsborough, of Ritherdons, I open this door." Avice bowed in mute assent.

"Liberate," the secretary commanded, and the official inserted his key, and turned it, and stood back.

Then the secretary spoke: "It having been satisfactorily proved to the proprietors of the Institution that the lady present is the widow of the late Squire Gainsborough, I unlock this safe," and he turned his key in the lock. The ponderous door swung open, and the ancient silver plate of

the House of Gainsborough met their gaze. Ranged on the steel shelves were bonds, scrip, stocks, shares, and bullion. With the exception of Ritherdons Grange and the furniture, all the wealth of the late Squire of Ritherdons was here.

And Cecil's legal eyes at once noted a parchment lying in one corner. "Dick's will made in due form by his lawyers immediately after his marriage, bequeathing all his wealth to his beloved wife Avice, to have and to hold absolutely," he announced, after rapidly running his eye over it.

"I congratulate you, my beloved Avice, on the recovery of your fortune," sweet Mrs. Earle said with ready tact, as she drew the trembling girl to her bosom.

"You will act for me, Cecil," Avice said as she pressed his hand.

"Certainly," he replied, thoughtfully, "so far as I can now."

And Avice turned and tendered her courteous thanks to the secretary, and with a bow walked up the iron steps of the Institution, with the proud consciousness that she was the representative of the last of the Gainsboroughs of Ritherdons, and the owner of all their wealth.

Cecil accompanied her to the family solicitors, and, after formally putting them in possession of all the necessary information, re-handed in their presence the key of the safe to Avice. She looked yearningly at him, but beyond a few grave

words of congratulation on the recovery of the property, he made no response. And she turned away as he bowed to the assembled company and left the room.

Next day he sent to the solicitors the vouchers from Osborne and Gall of the Gainsborough diamonds and an account of his various expenditures, explaining that he would remit the amount due, he trusted, on the return of some friends from the East. A day or two afterwards he received a note from Avice asking his advice on some legal matters connected with the real estate of Ritherdons, but he wrote in reply that he was unable, through professional etiquette, to give her counsel's opinion unless approached through her solicitors. He promptly received a letter from her solicitors apologizing for their delay in replying to his communication to them, but that they had not up to then communicated the substance of his letter to them to her. That Madam Gainsborough, in consideration of his great services, cancelled any debts he might consider he owed, and that they enclosed a notification to that effect, and further begged to enclose a preliminary retaining fee for 200 guineas on behalf of Madam Gainsborough, who earnestly desired to have the future benefit of such legal services as he could render.

Cecil Tarleton sent a reply to the solicitors, accepting the retainer and the duties requested.

He felt that the barrier of wealth had risen between him and Avice, and that as a wealthy

widow she could command a far better match than he could ever be—he, a penniless barrister.

More than a month had elapsed, and he was sitting in his chambers lost in sad thought—for he had gone back to them to curtail his expenses in every way—when a double rap sounded on his chambers' door, and a telegraph boy and a postman simultaneously handed him a telegram and a letter.

His eye sparkled and his cheek flushed as he read Tom's and Jim's telegram from Ceylon, and he gave a wild responsive hurrah; the far-distant Western echo to the British cheer that had resounded amongst the ruins of Diganda Watti Temple.

The letter was from Mrs. Earle, from the pretty house Avice had taken in London, anxiously asking after him, for Cecil had not cared to visit there; and Avice had not written to him since he had told her to apply for advice through her solicitors.

Mrs. Earle begged him to come and see her at once, and Cecil felt, especially after the news he had just received, he could not refuse. He was received at the door by Avice's faithful handmaiden, who had quite recovered from the effects of poor Dick's attack that night, and shown into a room. He looked eagerly round for kindly Mrs. Earle and Mary, but they were not there. Avice stood there, the love-light shining in her eyes, as she looked steadfastly at him.

"Have you nothing to say to me, Cecil?" she said, gently. "Come and sit down by me." He did so. "I know, Cecil, and appreciate why you have changed towards me, but I have talked long and earnestly to sweet Mrs. Earle. The barrier of my wealth must not, shall not, come between us. Cecil, I am solitary and alone; I want your love and protection. I love you—I know you love me; will you take me to be your true and loving wife? I know," she went on, "people would say it was unwomanly for me to ask you, but Mrs. Earle, who knows all, does not think so; and I am content," she added, as she saw the bright light of gladness that beamed in Cecil's eyes.

"My beloved Avice," he said, as he clasped her to his breast, "I had not dared to hope for such happiness. You are mine for ever. Hand and hand we will go down the pathways of time."

And Avice laid her head—her peaceful haven found at last after her storm-tossed life—on her betrothed's loving heart, while his strong protecting arm clasped round her.

"One kiss, beloved!" and their lips met, for the first time since they parted years before, in a long, lingering kiss of happiness and peace.

"You never answered my last letter years ago," Cecil said in a whisper.

"I never received it," Avice said simply, and a shade passed over Cecil's brow as he remem-

bered how her worldly mother must have intercepted their correspondence.

"Touch the bell, Cecil," Avice whispered. He did so, and Mrs. Earle and Mary came in. "Mother, dear, I have proposed to Cecil, and he has accepted me," Avice confessed, as she hid her blushing face on his shoulder.

"I am very glad, my beloved children," Mrs. Earle said, while Mary ran to Avice with a glad cry, and petted and fondled her, and took her off with her to be made much of and have a good cry together, after the manner of ladies on these momentous occasions.

"I shall not come to Avice penniless," Cecil said, smiling.

"I know that, my dear boy. We, too, have had a telegram this morning. Now listen: I have spoken to Avice; she is wealthy, alone, unprotected. It is better in every way you all should be married on the same day; she is prepared; I need not ask if you are," she said, smiling.

And a happier quartette in the world did not sit down to dinner that night.

Another month passed by on lightning wings for Cecil and Avice, and two bronzed and stalwart figures appeared on the scene. And, amid tears of joy and loving congratulations, Jim and Tom produced their wealth of sparkling jewels.

"Here is my wedding present to you, Avice," Tom Earle said, as he handed her a magnificent

necklace of dark-blue sapphires, perforated in the Eastern fashion, and strung together like pearls, their exquisite colour matching Avice's eyes, and forming bright contrast to her golden hair.

"And here is mine," Jim Bolitho said, as he handed her a matchless "pigeon's-blood" coloured ruby, and which, smiling and blushing, Avice took. "Here you are, Mary," her brother continued, as he gave her a splendid set of emeralds.

"And here, my sweet one," said Jim, tenderly, "is a set of the finest pearls." And when Mrs. Earle had chosen a set of cat's-eyes from the gems, the ladies left them to chat over their treasures and prospective husbands.

"We are going to do the thing in style to-morrow, Cecil," Jim and Tom said. "We have ordered the biggest luncheon to be prepared at Jeffrey's Henrietta Mansions in Cavendish Square, and have invited all the swell jewellers in London to come and buy."

And next day, after the crowd of admiring jewellers had departed, and all the jewels sold, after a busy reckoning of the sums they had received, the trio found they had a little over £43,000.

"Here is our agreement," Cecil said; "half to Tom, quarter to Jim, and quarter to me."

"All right," the two responded.

"Here you are, Earle," and Earle took his heap of money, £20,000.

"Catch hold, Jim." Jim took his heap of

£10,000, and Cecil took £10,000. The £3,000 remained on the table. "We were very generous yesterday," Tom said, "giving the girls and my mother jewellery in which you had a share; they were worth about £3,000, so you take that money, Cecil; Tom and I have settled it."

"May I take this £3,000?" Cecil inquired, as he gathered up the notes.

"Certainly, we both wish it," they said in a breath

"Tom Earle, you will look after your mother." Tom nodded. "Avice and I will be wealthy," Cecil continued. "I now give this money to Mary Earle, to help her and Jim," and they all shook hands, and a waiter appeared on the scene —not empty-handed.

There was a quiet double wedding, with the brides in travelling dress, a few days afterwards at the Church of St. Clements Dane, Strand, close by the new Halls of Justice and Hare Court, Middle Temple. And there was a wedding breakfast in Cecil Tarleton's chambers—his no longer, as Tom Earle had leased them from him and gave the breakfast.

And Mrs. Jukes and Mrs. Scroggins attended on them in caps of preternatural whiteness and stiffness; and they held a happy wedding breakfast and started for their honeymoon.

After Tom Earle and his mother had seen them off at the station he took her about and devoted himself to her like a dutiful son, while they talked of the troubled past and bright future.

"I will buy Ritherdons from you," Tom Earle had said to Avice, "and raise a new house and race above the ruins of the old."

And after Tom Earle had seen his mother to bed, he deviously wandered to Hare Court and up the ancient stairs of the Inn to his chambers. On entering his bedroom he found an aged female of depressing exterior fearfully snoring in his bed; whereat he, the aforesaid Thomas Merle Earle, waxed exceeding wroth; and, on proceeding to investigate, discovered that Mrs. Scroggins had been sampling the unwonted beverages of the marriage feast with such success as to render her oblivious to sublunary cares. While so engaged he heard indignant shouts from the ground floor.

"What's up?" he asked, as he poked his head over the banisters. And, so please you, he saw the learned barrister, who occupied the ground floor, and who had returned shortly after Earle, standing in the attitude of Ajax defying the lightning at the foot of the stairs.

"What in thunder and blue blazes is your old woman doing in my bed?" was the not unnatural query of the learned gentleman on the ground floor, who had just discovered Mrs. Jukes in his bed, sleeping the sleep of the just.

Thomas gasped, but proved equal to the occasion. "Well, if it comes to *that*, what in blue blazes and thunder is *your* old woman doing in *my* bed?"

"Oh!" responded the barrister.

"Ah!" said Thomas. Then they looked owlishly at each other.

"Couldn't we shove them both into the barrel at the corner of the court?" the barrister anxiously inquired.

"I am afraid there isn't room in it for both," Thomas replied, mournfully; "but look here," he continued, as a thought struck him, "there is the tail end of a marriage feast up here; come up, and we'll grill some bones and have some supper."

"All right," the barrister responded with alacrity, and they devilled bones and drank the golden rain of France, and pledged each other in a curious cordial brought from beyond the seas, yclept Irish whisky, and shook hands and swore eternal friendship, and they have been the greatest of chums ever since; and the barrister introduced Earle to his people, and Tom Earle is engaged to his sister. And when Jim Bolitho and Mary, and Cecil Tarleton and Avice, return from their honeymoons, Tom Earle is going to be married in this year of Grace Eighteen Hundred and Ninety.

THE END.

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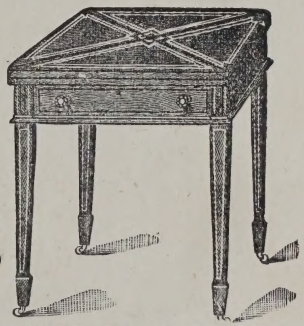

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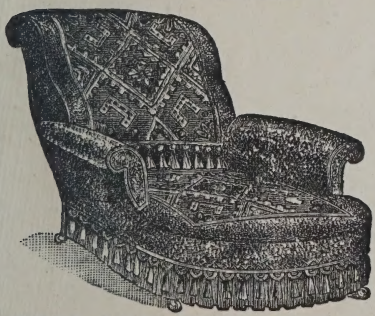

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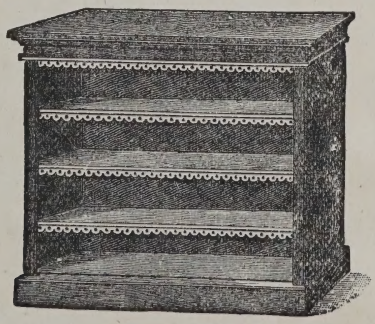

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